AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS THE FINEST KIT YOUR RIG DESERVES

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG
PC PowerPlay
SINCE 1996

PREVIEW

INKULINATI

TURN-BASED BATTLES WITH LIVING INK

PIZZA TOWER

FIGHT THROUGH A SKYSCRAPER MADE OF DOUGH

MYSTICAL DELIGHT

TCHIA

EXPLORE A BEAUTIFUL TROPICAL ISLAND FILLED WITH MAGIC

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

WARFRAME

DISCOVER A NEW ROGUELIKE DIMENSION IN THE DUVIRI PARADOX

+

PLUS: THE 10-YEAR HISTORY OF GAMING'S WILDEST MMO

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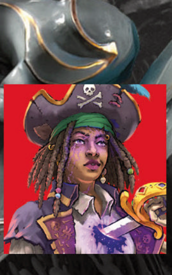

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“NOW SEEMS THE BEST TIME EVER TO JUMP INTO WARFRAME”

When *Warframe* originally launched back in March 2013, there was much hype at the time about an unreleased game called *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. Fast-forward a decade and PC gamers are not only still playing both these games but, amazingly, great new official content is still being made for them.

And, for *Warframe*, its new *The Duviri Paradox* expansion is an incredibly fitting way to celebrate its 10-year anniversary. Indeed, now seems the best time ever to jump into the free-to-play online shooter, as our huge feature on page 34 excitingly shows.

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

The PC PowerPlay team

CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Twitter
@screencuisine
This month
Soul-jacked a bemused crab to solve a puzzle in *Tchia*, while also evading spooky cloth zombies.

SEAN MARTIN
Twitter
@RemainsToBeSean
This month
Fought mutated undead horrors in space daily, also he reviewed the *Dead Space* remake.

TYLER WILDE
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@tyler_wilde
This month
Injected '90s-style FMV cutscenes into his eyeballs in puzzle game *Grand Inquisitor.*

JODY MACGREGOR
Twitter
@jodymacgregor
This month
Wore a set of pixelated 8-bit sunglasses while fighting a giant chicken in *Lost Ark*.

Contents

AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS THE FINEST KIT YOUR RIG DESERVES
PC PowerPlay
INKULINATI
TURN-BASED BATTLES WITH LIVING INK
PIZZA TOWER
TCHIA
EXCLUSIVE ACCESS
WARFRAME
DISCOVER A NEW ROGUELIKE DIMENSION IN THE DUVIRI PARADOX
PLUS THE 10-YEAR HISTORY OF GAMING'S WILDEST MMO
SHADOW GAMBIT
CYBERPUNK 2077 MODS

Monitor

06 THE TOP STORY
How PCPP broke *RuneScape*

08 THE SPY
New gaming rumours investigated

10 SPECIAL REPORT
Selling retro games needs a rethink

12 SECRET LEVEL
Lukas Donkers on the art of coding

14 INCOMING
The hottest games to get excited for

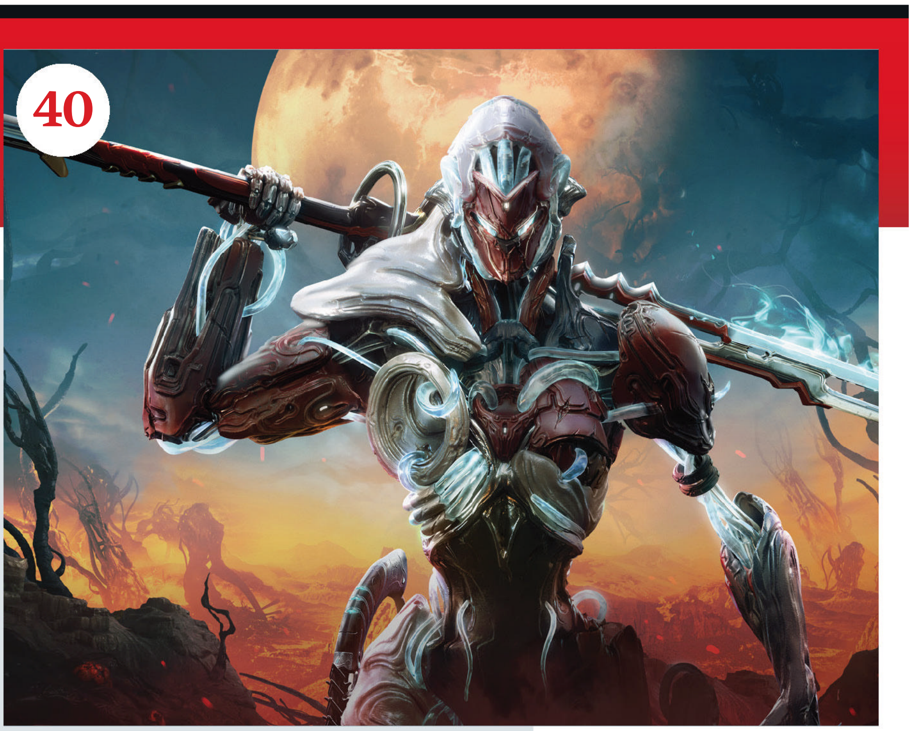
Previews

16 Tchia
22 Havendock
24 Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened
26 Shadow Gambit
30 Inkulinati
32 King of the Castle

16
TCHIA
Discover the secrets of a tropical island paradise while stealing the souls of animals, solving puzzles and defeating spooky zombies made out of cloth.

34
THE DUVIRI PARADOX
The inside story on the epic new *Warframe* expansion.

40
THE HISTORY OF WARFRAME
Ten years of all out war is celebrated in our huge feature.



84
AUSTRALIAN
PC AWARDS

96
MARKER FRAGMENT
PICK UP

52
DEAD SPACE

Dead Space returns from the grave after 15 years, but is this heavily upgraded remake any good? Read our authoritative review to find out.

84
AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS

The finest hardware of the year rated by the team, including bonus Epic Fails winners.

92
MOD SPOTLIGHT

Get back into *Cyberpunk 2077* with our recommended mods that make the cops be more cop-like, plus get up above it all in a flying car and more to make CP2077 great again.

Features

34 The Duviri Paradox
40 History of Warframe

Reviews

52 Dead Space
56 Roller Drama
58 One Piece Odyssey
62 Colossal Cave
64 Forspoken
68 Persona 3 Portable
72 Mahokenshi
74 Power Chord
76 Aquatico
78 Pizza Tower
80 Season: A Letter to the Future

FREE GAMES

82 The Telwynium: Book Two
83 Hue Flowing
83 Battle of Windows

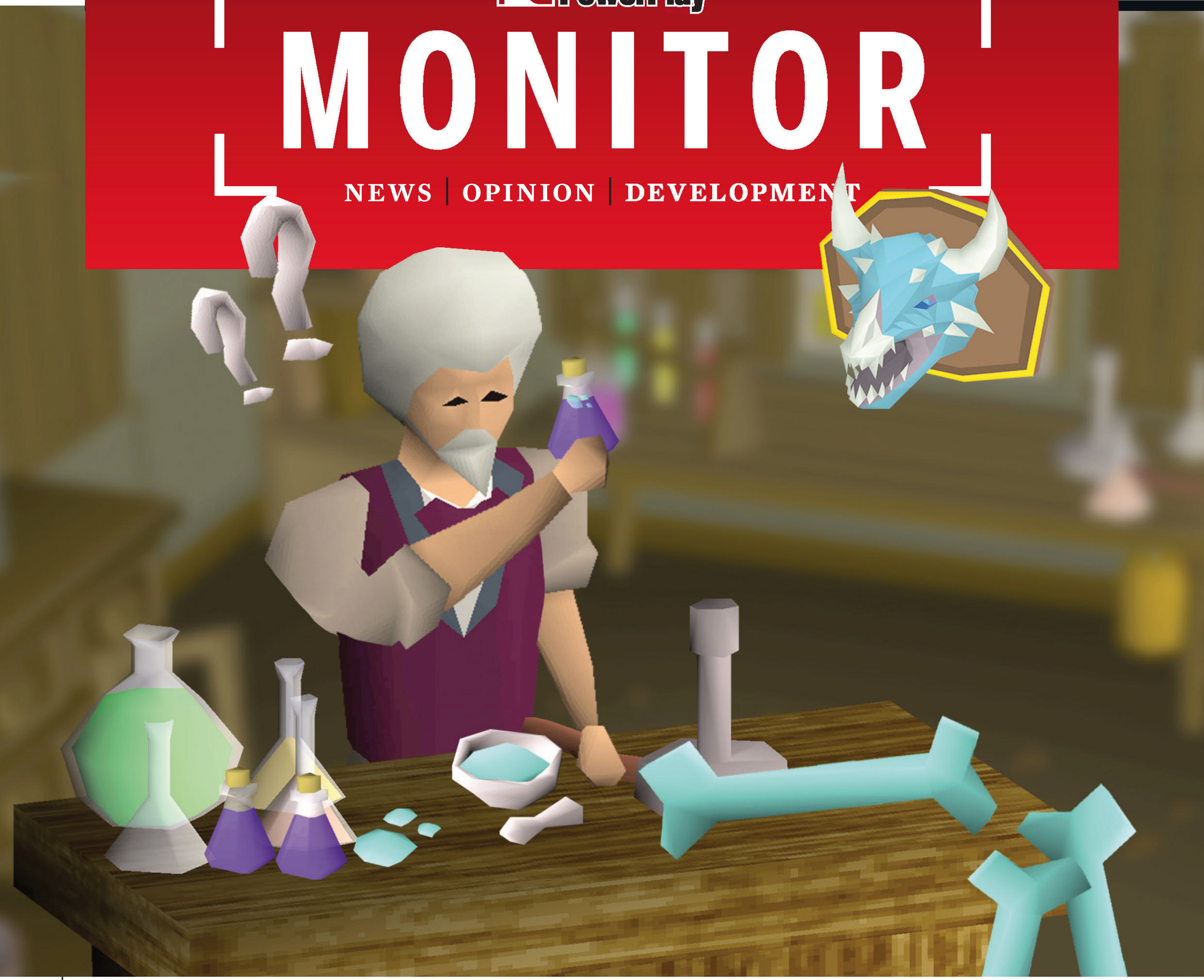
Hardware

84 THE 2023 AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS WINNERS

Extra Life

92 MOD SPOTLIGHT
Essential *Cyberpunk 2077* upgrades

96 HOW TO
Get the *Dead Space* secret ending



CASHING IN

A RUNESCAPE player's approach to grinding saw the game struggling to cope

There's dedication, and then there's dedication. And then sometimes, there's a little bit too much dedication. An old-school *Runescape* player with the handle NC State (presumably not an official representative of the Raleigh-based university) finally sought his reward for grinding an infamous minigame, the Brimhaven obstacle course, for eight years. But without banking the rewards.

Rough math estimates this grind would have taken upwards of 5,000 hours of game time with near-perfect play, and all in the same dungeon doing the same few things.

What is blowing *Runescape* players' minds about this is the Agility choice, a stat they all spurn: but then, maybe that was the point.

NC State finally brought his journey home, turning in everything and gaining 178 million XP in *Runescape*'s suboptimal Agility skill in less than a minute. This was such a rapid influx that the game's built-in experience per hour tracker couldn't keep up: it tapped out at 2.147 billion even though NC State was getting a rate of 10.8 billion per hour.

THIS GRIND WOULD HAVE TAKEN UPWARDS OF 5,000 HOURS OF GAME TIME

Agility in *Runescape* is not exactly the long-running MMO's sexiest skill: it's associated with cool rogue stuff like the Graceful Outfit in-game, but mechanically it just gives you more stamina and lets you access assorted shortcuts throughout the map. One of the primary ways you can level it up is the Brimhaven Agility Arena, a kind of skill vendor minigame.

It involves clicking around a grid-based arena to highlighted pillars and watching cute little skill-check cutscenes of your character walking a tightrope or

WARRING MATILDA

AUSSIE WARSHIPPING

World of Warships will include its first Australian commander, plus an Aussie ship, in a special themed adventure, running until April 19th. You will follow the path of an Australian bushranger who is trying to reach the mythical continent of Mu by means of a legendary ship – the Brisbane. ■ ***JW***

LADY OF THE RINGS

ELDEN RING ENDINGS

Almost 26% of *Elden Ring* players finished the game by completing the long and complicated Ranni questline, compared to less than 20% who got the standard Elden Lord ending. It goes to show, people will follow a cute From Software waifu to the ends of the earth given the chance. ■ ***RV***

I'M AFRAID I CAN'T GRADE THAT

AI 'WRITES' HOMEWORK

Despite teachers cracking down on AI homework help, one student decided to program a 3D printer to produce homework written by OpenAI's ChatGPT software. While the language skills of ChatGPT may land them a sub-par grade in English, there's no doubt this kid's getting an A in ICT. ■ ***KW***

WANTED
HATIUS COSAINTUS

Training Agility involves running tiny point-and-click obstacle courses on a loop, with virtually no variance or meaningful skill expression.

avoiding bladed traps. It seems like an OK thing to do precisely once. NC State has put in thousands of hours doing it since 2015. This project has spanned three American presidencies.

AGILE THOUGHTS

To hear NC State describe it, it actually doesn't sound as bad as all that. "I do want to add that Brimhaven is a leisurely place or at least it can be if you don't do obstacles while you wait," he explained in response to user ElMico, who had estimated that this project required a ballpark 4,800 hours. "Many times you're watching YouTube, reading news, browsing the web, etc. I almost never was on my computer for the sole purpose of doing agility but I almost always had *Runescape* up whenever I was on."

So less a question of raw will and endurance, more patience and commitment. Like tending a garden. After all those years of work, What benefits can NC State expect from a godly 200 million agility XP, then? Stamina that never drains? Forbidden über-secret shortcuts? Well, for all practical purposes *Runescape*'s skills cap out at level 99 or only 13 million XP, so this was all for the bit. Fair enough NC State, though I gotta wonder what he's gonna have on in the background while watching YouTube now. ■

Ted Lichfield

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

King John

As Meta announced the closure of Echo VR, industry legend John Carmack got mad about games disappearing forever: "I believe in saving everything."

Deepest Rock

Deep Rock Galactic is letting players experience the OG version.

Stadia shutdown

Google's cloud gaming device is dead – but it refunded everyone.

D& no D

Wizards of the Coast has tried to screw companies making D&D things under the traditional open game licence.

Uri Git

A card was returned to the *Pokémon* game after Uri Gellar admitted "I was a fool" to sue Nintendo.

The new blue

The Day Before, has had a delay, a bad reveal, the dev blaming everyone.

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy used to think that leaking was a victimless crime. When The Spy was just a trainee, it was easy to ignore the real, human cost of the information trade. Some target didn't want their information broadcast to the world? Well, maybe they shouldn't have kept so many secrets that people were willing to pay money to see.

That was until The Spy's own expense account was leaked, and The Spy learned that, actually, there are consequences at play. Consequences like being forced to appear in front of an independent committee investigating the "frankly irresponsible" number of weaponised Aston Martins found abandoned around the Swiss Alps. Or being forced to attend a seminar about the most reasonably priced cocktails to order when infiltrating a swanky party held by a gloating ne'er-do-well as a front for some nefarious deal.

And so The Spy really does feel for the staff of BioWare, who were the recent victims of a *Dragon Age: Dreadwolf* leak. It's a tough break: footage clearly not intended for public consumption, now free to be pored over without the necessary context or knowledge of current development plans. Frankly, The Spy would prefer not to look, but The Spy has also just been informed that the many false pens The Spy commissioned – a set containing everything from cameras to fibre wires to paracetamol – will not be reimbursed. Time to pay the bills. The footage appeared on Reddit, before being taken down and reshared widely elsewhere. There are a handful of screenshots, along with a short gif showing a knight character tangling with some darkspawn. It is, in many ways, a modern action-focused RPG. Naturally, the internet has opinions about that.

The images were – according to the person who posted them – taken from a 20-minute video that they were shown by a former playtester. All of it is set in these same ruins, which it's claimed is a Grey Warden fortress called Weisshaupt. The combat is described as being entirely real-time. Alongside the player character are two companions – "another knight dude and a female dwarf rogue" – who, it's said, the player has no direct control over. The leaker says they've been told the reference point for combat is 2018's *God of War*.

COMING OF AGE

Assuming all of this is true, it could suggest a further step back from *Dragon Age*'s core RPG roots. *Dragon Age* has always been pretty malleable – changing with both the times and EA's whims. The big, popular things now are open-world action games with *Souls*-lite hack-and-slash combat. It would not be out of character, especially given its lengthy development, for *Dreadwolf* to err on the side of the safe and popular.

But also, who knows. As mentioned, *Dreadwolf* has been cooking in one form or another for a long time. It's hard to say what stage of development this footage represents, and how reflective it might be of the final game. Those secrets are, for now, still secure in BioWare's Edmonton office. The Spy would attempt to find out more, but – thanks to some aforementioned leaks – can no longer book international flights without explicit, prior approval from the accounting team. Spy out. ■

The Spy

THEY'VE BEEN TOLD THE REFERENCE POINT FOR COMBAT IS 2018'S GOD OF WAR

THE SPY
The Spy is learning to be frugal.

AFTERSHOCK

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Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

A great port... possibly outsold by the Sega Saturn version.

LOST IN STEAM

RETRO GAMES are added to Steam every month – so why is no one buying them?

***Dwarf Fortress* sold almost half a million copies in under a month when it launched on Steam last December. Bubbly 2D farming/life sim *Stardew Valley* currently clears 30,000 concurrent users a day even at off-peak times. *Carrion*, a small Metroidvania where you play as a faceless monster trying to escape a secret facility, has garnered over 17,000 positive reviews. There are indie hits on Steam all the time, yet the classics they're often inspired by – some of the best, most timeless games ever made – keep arriving on Steam to less fanfare than a new piece of *Euro Truck Simulator* DLC.**

The passage of time has made crystal clear just how truly great some of these '80s and '90s games are. No game in Taito's *Puzzle Bobble* series has ever surpassed *Puzzle Bobble 2X*'s sublime Tetris-like balance between simplicity and complexity. *Realms of the Haunting* is pretty much first-person *Resident Evil* years before first-person *Resident Evil* existed. *Twinkle Star Sprites* is a wild sugar rush of a cute/competitive puzzle-shmup that's exactly as brilliantly bananas as it sounds.

But these oldies are swiftly lost to the depths of Steam and only found by a few people like me who already know what to look for. A recent example is *Elevator Action Returns*. The only other PC release for this action-platformer bursting with Die Hard-level setpieces was 17 years ago. At its peak on Steam, *Elevator Action Returns* hit ten concurrent players.

Why are these games so overlooked? PC players have proven, over and over again, that we will listen when niche developers explain their nigh-unmarketable ideas to us. But the publishers responsible for these semi-secret releases must dare to imagine we're interested. Heck, we need them to imagine an audience at all. *Elevator Action Returns*' publisher tweeted about the game just three times in English, and not a single one of those tweets was on launch day. Who wouldn't miss a game advertised like that (if you can even call three tweets advertising)?

Retro game Steam descriptions are filled with dry Wikipedia-level trivia that might as well be saying 'if you're not already in the know, run along and stream something with ray-traced loot boxes on your TikToks'.

Why treat these games purely as historical artefacts when they still offer unique experiences we can't get anywhere else? How many shmups dare to stick a digitised photo of a cat in their bullet-dodging climax like 1991's *Metal Black*? How many platformers let you use springy fishing lines as your primary mode of transportation like the charming *Umahara Kawase*? The focus is all wrong, and all of our Steam libraries are worse

S-Tribute?

The S is for Saturn. Tokyo-based retro publisher City Connection teamed up with Taito in early 2022 to re-release a selection of revered Sega Saturn games from the mid '90s polished up with some modern emulator niceties like rewind, save states and scanlines. Most of them were last released in 2006, making these revivals a long time coming.

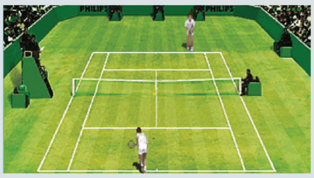
P1
310
P2
250
NEXT
NEXT
FREE PLAY

FAR LEFT: Let's hope *Dead Cells* handles Konami's marketing from now on.

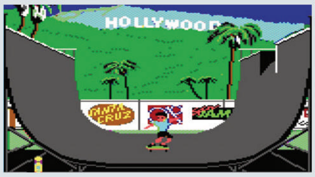
LEFT: The other best puzzle game of all time.

ARCHIVAL PIXELS

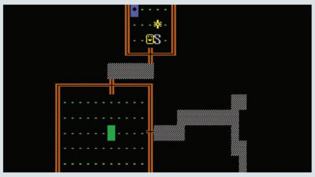
Retro publisher Pixel Games UK has amassed quite a collection of classics on Steam



INTERNATIONAL TENNIS OPEN
Regarded as a shining example of what multimedia entertainment should be, way back in December '94.



CALIFORNIA GAMES
The sickest sports of 1987: BMX, skateboarding... and also 'footbag'. We don't talk about footbag.



ROGUE
The random dungeon crawler that's literally where the term 'roguelike' came from.

ACTUA ICE HOCKEY 2
Hockey games are still rare on PC today, and this one has impressive motion captured animation for a 1999 game.

off for these artificial boundaries set up by publishers selling games that we *might really like*, if they'd let us in.

Pixel Games, for example, sells fresh ports of some of the Atari Lynx's finest games – so it's a shame to see them use their one chance to reach out wasted on mini history lessons. They bizarrely even include self-effacing blurbs like "The Ultimate in Tennis Simulation! (In 1994, anyway!)", undercutting what could still be a fun game.

Even larger publishers often fall into the same retro rut. Konami's *Castlevania Anniversary Collection* seems to think generic phrases like 'timeless classics' are all it takes to sell us on the broody whip-based adventures within. This sigh of information is in stark contrast to *Dead Cells*' upcoming *Castlevania* DLC page, the text bursting with enthusiasm for gothic castles filled with Dracula's minions.

WHY TREAT THESE GAMES PURELY AS HISTORICAL ARTEFACTS?

These words matter, because they're all these games have left once the meagre social campaigns have ended. Age doesn't make a game less relevant on Steam, but treating it like it's only relevant *because* of its age does.

It's really no wonder we spend our time and money on retro-in-every-way-but-age games like *Hyper Gunsport* instead. It succinctly describes itself as "cyberpunk volleyball with guns" rather than rushing in with a mini history lesson on Data East's spiritually similar *Windjammers*. Celeste openly revels in its difficulty; *Undertale* doesn't preemptively apologise for its consciously crude monochrome battle art and simple pixelated world, "In this RPG, you don't have to kill anyone," is the first line on the game's website, and the first feature listed on its Steam page. *Undertale* assumes we're intelligent and curious, and believes it has something interesting to offer everyone, not just those who remember *EarthBound*.

RETRO FIT

Retro games – no, let's just call them what they are: *games* – don't have to graphically compete with headline holiday releases or offer novel avant-garde concepts to gain our attention. Just look at the runaway success of *Vampire Survivors*, a game that's pretty much 'shoot things, then shoot more things, repeat until it's five in the morning'. But their publishers do have to start looking past the end of their low-poly noses if they want more than a few crumbs from the gigantic PC gaming pie, because their continual inward focus on value and retro obviously isn't working out for any of us.

These games are one current part of the wider gaming world we all participate in, yet their publishers insist on presenting them as a withered offshoot. Steam is a haven for offbeat 2D games stuffed to the brim with unusual ideas and 3D adventures happy to show off sharp edges and dithered textures. It's where these games find their feet and their fans – fans like us. Fans who share and stream our best moments, who rope our friends in for a quick online session and turn our tiny pixel people into elaborate fanart. It'd be great if these old games could join in on our fun, instead of voluntarily gatekeeping themselves into irrelevance. ■

Kerry Brunskill

CODE OPEN

Freelance programmer **LUKAS DONKERS** on the art of coding gameplay into our games

There are multiple ways to become a full-time game programmer, but Lukas Donkers essentially did it by... programming a game. A very successful one, for the Ludum Dare game jam. "We made a physics puzzle game [...] we called it *String Theory*, because your only interaction was moving lines around."

This was something he made with fellow students during his computer science degree. It did very well in the jam, with plenty of positive feedback, so they went on to upload it to free game websites such as Kongregate and Armor Games. Within a few weeks it had been played over 100,000 times, with a huge amount of encouraging comments. "That's why I always kind of put it at the top of my resume," says Donkers. "Game companies do love seeing that kind of stuff."

This practical application of his skills helped Donkers earn a place at Moon Studios as his first industry job, working on *Ori and the Will of the Wisps*. "I worked on the time trial mode, a lot of the bosses that are in the game, and a lot of tooling as well. Like, when we made the cinematic for E3, that was actually all in the editor." But when it comes to gameplay, what actually *is* programming?

"So you might know that games run at 60 frames per second," says Donkers. "That doesn't just talk about the graphics, it's actually also talking about how often the logic in the game runs. You could say for example, the character moves one pixel to the right. And since that is happening 60 frames per second, that character is going to be moving smoothly across the screen. Because you wrote that one little line of code, you could expand that and you could say, 'We'll only do that if the player is holding the right arrow key'. You can expand that again, add the left arrow key, maybe add a jump to the up arrow key. Bit by bit, every line you write is essentially going to add a little bit of logic to the game. It ends up being a lot of stuff interacting with each other and that ends up being a huge system. But in the end, it's all composed of individual lines of code that do very simple things."

TOP RATED PROGRAM

A programmer will work with the designer to ensure that what's there is actually fun to play, a process that begins with prototyping and continues throughout the process. "I might try something. And then I would give it to a game designer. And they would say, 'Well, can you change it a little bit like this? Or can you maybe add this feature?' and a lot of work gets thrown away just because it ends up not being fun, but [the prototype is] really just a testbed. Nothing has to look good, it's just about getting a feel for things."

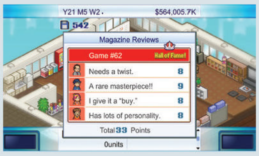
It's when the prototype stage is finished, and a publisher and/or funding has been secured, that everything is polished. "It starts from the stage of like, 'Hey, let's just figure out what the hell we're actually doing,' to making it optimised, bug free. Integrating it with art and actual levels. So for example, you might have the start of a mechanic that initially is fun, but you don't know where in the game it's going to. It's going to be important. So this is where you work with a designer and they might say well, we'll put it in world two, but that means we also need some harder enemies to go with it."

There are often multiple ways to code the same thing, something that Donkers has seen when porting finished games from one format to another. "It's hard enough to ship a game. Sometimes players are like, 'Oh, these coders, they can't even fix a single bug.' I've been in the trenches. I know how maybe that one bug didn't get fixed because 200 other bugs *did*. [...] Getting it done at all is a huge achievement. I will say that to anyone, if you've managed to finish a game, be proud of yourself, because not just anyone can do that." ■

Luke Kemp

GAMING THE SYSTEM

Try running a whole developer



GAME DEV STORY
Simple, but that's part of its charm, as is the fact it doesn't take itself too seriously.

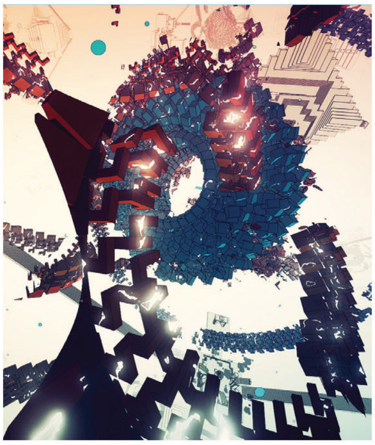
GAME DEV TYCOON
Full of humour and that elusive one-more-go juice, it's earned its positive Steam reviews.

MAD GAMES TYCOON 2
Currently in Early Access, a sandbox mode was added for full gameplay customisation.

SOFTWARE INC
This sim is developed by just one person. Life and art caught in an eternal feedback loop.

“IT’S ALL COMPOSED OF INDIVIDUAL LINES OF CODE THAT DO VERY SIMPLE THINGS”

Imagine *Ori and the Will of the Wisps* on your CV as your *first* job.



ABOVE: Donkers also worked on *Shadow Point*, a VR puzzler narrated by Patrick Stewart.

LEFT: *Manifold Garden* is visually complex, but was no more difficult to program than other games.

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

RELEASE March 17, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Respawn Entertainment

Cal Kestis returns after the events of *Star Wars Jedi: Outcast* equipped with new powers, lightsabers and, excitingly, rideable mounts, as well.

DELAYED! As we went to press it was announced that System Shock has been delayed until May 30. Awesome.

SYSTEM SHOCK

RELEASE March, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Nightdive Studios

A full-scale remake of the iconic sci-fi horror classic, with upgraded gameplay mechanics, graphics and audio. SHODAN is as scary as ever!

RESIDENT EVIL 4

RELEASE March 24, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

A complete ground-up remake of this legendary zombie epic that promises more tension, bigger scares, and plenty of hi-res gore and guts.

3 months

STAR TREK: RESURGENCE

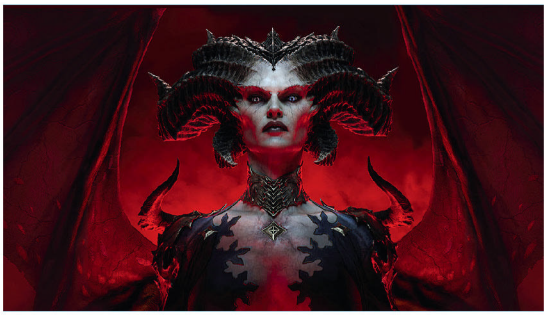
RELEASE April 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Dramatic Labs

The delayed Star Trek narrative adventure game from former Telltale designers is finally set to finally arrive this April. Set phasers to stun!

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE May 26, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios

A co-op action-adventure third-person shooter that lets you jump into the nefarious shoes of the Suicide Squad. Holy guacamole Batman!



DIABLO IV

RELEASE June 6, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Blizzard

The beloved action-RPG series returns once more with a darker look, plenty of exciting classes to play as and, hopefully, no auction house.

6 months

FINAL FANTASY XVI

RELEASE June 22, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Square Enix

Final Fantasy returns once more, with gamers slipping into the shoes of Clive Rosfield during his adventures in Valisthea. Chocobos will be ridden.

BOMB RUSH CYBERFUNK

RELEASE Summer 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Team Reptile

The spiritual successor to the skate-and-graffiti-'em-up classic *Jet Set Radio* promises an equally funky soundtrack and slicker, expanded gameplay.

BALDUR'S GATE 3

RELEASE August, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Larian Studios

The legendary fantasy RPG returns in the hands of Larian Studios, the talented chaps behind the *Divinity: Original Sin* games. Minsc and Boo confirmed!

12 months+

STARFIELD

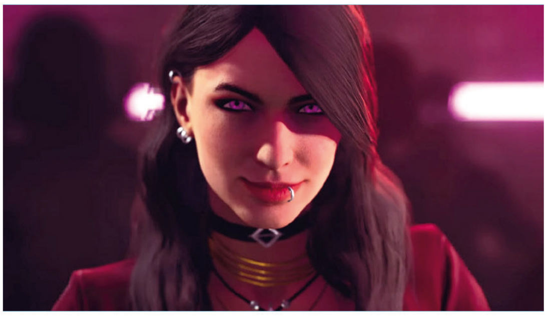
RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

'*Skyrim* in space' sure sounds like a mighty fine idea for a videogame, and it sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new singleplayer RPG. So, fingers crossed.

HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox Software

The venerable 3D real-time space strategy *Homeworld* series returns in 2023, picking up the story after the events of the two previous games.



VAMPIRE TM – BLOODLINES 2

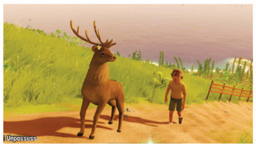
RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, the current state of *Bloodlines 2* remains a mystery. Could the RPG return from the dead this year?

INCOMING?

HORIZON: FORBIDDEN WEST

Whispers in the rumour mill point towards the highly-rated PlayStation game getting a PC port sooner rather than later. The game looked beautiful on PS5, so it may be time to order that RTX 4080 you've had your eye on.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2023	Awaceb	In-house	awaceb.com/tchia

TCHIA

Explore a beautiful tropical island filled with magic

I've solved puzzles in adventure games by using a crab before, but I've never solved a puzzle by becoming one. But when I need to cut a chain in *Tchia,* that's just what I do. I soul-hop into a crab and use its (now my) pincers to snip the chain. Neat!

PLAYED IT

That's just one instance of the useful soul-jumping magic on display in *Tchia*, an open world adventure from developer Awaceb. The game is heavily inspired by the island of New Caledonia in the southwest Pacific Ocean, where the co-founders of Awaceb grew up. In the beta I'm playing I've got access to only one of the game's three islands, and while exploring a third of a game world seems like it would be restrictive, the island I'm on is genuinely massive. It's also stunning to look at, a lush and tropical world with beaches, forests, mountains, rivers, villages and camps, hidden grottos and caves, and it's packed with all sorts of beautiful wildlife like deer, boar, lizards, a number of different kind of birds, plus aquatic life like fish, sharks and sea turtles.

Thanks to my magic soul-transferring powers, I can become any of those animals, at least briefly. All I need to do is get close to a creature and I can leap into its body. If it's a bird, I can take flight, if it's a turtle I can swim, and if it's a deer I can thunder across the landscape much faster than my human legs can carry me. The magical possession only lasts until Tchia's soul meter runs out, but while that's maybe 30 seconds or so, it's plenty of time to have fun and even solve a few problems.

ONE BIRD I POSSESSED COULD POOP AT WILL WHEN I CLICKED THE MOUSE

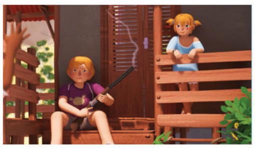
SOUL SURFER

Often these animals I briefly possess have abilities I can use, like the crab I possessed to cut that chain. But that's just the start. One quest required me to find a chicken egg, but even after finding a small farm with a bunch of chickens strolling around, I wasn't sure how to acquire an egg from one. I tried talking to the farmer, I searched the area near the chickens, but I was stumped until I remembered, oh yeah! I can become a chicken. I zapped my soul into one of the chickens and sure enough, I could click the mouse button to lay an egg. It was cracked – that's the risk with carelessly firing an egg out of your butt, I guess – but I could still zip my soul back out of the chicken, become human, pick up the egg, and put it into my backpack. Mission complete.

Other animals have skills I haven't found a use for yet, but I'm confident I will. Possess a bat and you can use night vision while flapping around on your leathery wings. Both dogs and wild boars are able to dig holes in the ground, which I'm sure will be useful at some point – I just need to find the right spot to dig. And I'm sure becoming a sea creature will lead to some undersea discoveries once I have more time to explore the depths of the ocean surrounding the island I'm on. One bird I possessed could poop at will when I clicked the mouse… I'm not sure if that's a skill I'll need or if it's just a gag, but either way it's fun to do.

GETTING AROUND

If that's not enough, Tchia can possess not just living creatures but also inanimate objects, though once she's soul-hopped into a rock, lantern, barrel, or coconut, those objects definitely become animated. Don't want to risk climbing down a steep cliff? Just leap Tchia's soul into a nearby rock and roll yourself off the edge. Rocks can handle long falls, even if people can't. And you don't even need a particular reason to possess something: rolling down the road as a barrel is fun on its own. Possession is also handy for taking on



Maano, the villains of the island. The Maano are weird, spooky humanoids made of fabric that can be found in small camps around the island, sort of like cloth zombies. They're pretty slow, but they'll fling scraps of fabric at you, which will tangle you up, requiring you to hammer the space bar to escape. To defeat them you need to set them on fire, which is where the possession skill helps. Sure, you can grab nearby lanterns or gas cans, hold them over your head, and fling them at the cloth zombies, but it's far more effective to possess a lantern, fling yourself at a Maano, then de-posses it just before it hits. Boom! The lantern will ignite the enemy as you safely leap away in your own body. With some possession practice you can take out a camp of Maano in a matter of seconds, burning the creepy, clothy ghouls to ash.

SOUL-HOP

And don't think for a minute that Tchia needs to soul-hop into birds or dogs or fuel cans to get things done: she has plenty of talents herself, especially when it comes to travelling across the island. She can slide down steep hills, gently soar through the air with a glider (until her stamina runs out), and even clamber to the top of a tree, rock it back and forth, and fling herself from it like a catapult. With the soul-jump and her natural traversal skills, Tchia is like Spider-Man crossed with Corvo Attano, only, you know, she's a sweet little kid. Once I've got some practice with her skills and powers, the island quickly transforms from a beautiful view to an acrobatic playground.

Just one example: while at the top of a mountain I spotted a tiny seaside town along the coast, far off in the distance. I leapt off and sailed in the town's direction using my colourful glider, but as my stamina ran out I was still far, far above the ground. I soul-jumped into a passing bird, flapped my wings to cover more distance, but was still pretty high up when my soul-meter started running low. I leapt back into human form, fell for a while, then spied a rock on the ground, which I soul-jumped into. Bingo. I was now safely on the ground and had nearly reached the distant town in under a minute, while it would have taken ages to get that far on foot.

MYTHIC QUESTS

Tchia's goal isn't just exploring for the fun of it (though there's plenty of that). She is searching for her father, who has been abducted by an evil tyrant named Meavora – the same guy who animated those creepy cloth zombies. And while searching for her dad, there are plenty of other quests to complete, some given by other inhabitants of the island. In fact, the beta began with a woman getting my attention by firing a rifle in the air – a pretty alarming moment considering Tchia is just a little kid.

But it turns out this gun-toting villager just wanted me to find her a crab to cook for dinner, which I eventually did (it might have even been the same crab I possessed to snip that chain). Once I deliver her crab, she invites me to dinner, and during a cooking minigame I bond with her daughter, who is about Tchia's age. Despite the jarring gunshot that started this relationship, it turns into a sweet and gentle friendship and there's a nice moment of community after dinner where I play my ukulele with other musicians while the townsfolk dance.

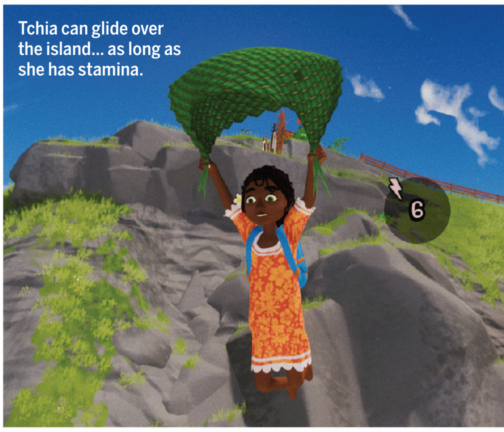
HIDDEN TREASURES

Also helping me forget that this woman fired a gun in my vicinity is the fact that she rewards me with a treasure map, my number one favourite item in open world games and the perfect excuse to explore more of the vast island. At a dock on the coast I help myself to a raft, raise the sail, and cruise around the blue waters of the island looking for the landmark shown on the map, which takes me to a treasure chest... which contains another map. In fact, it leads to a chain of treasure hunts, which not only provide me with new maps but a story that gives me more details about the island's troubled history.

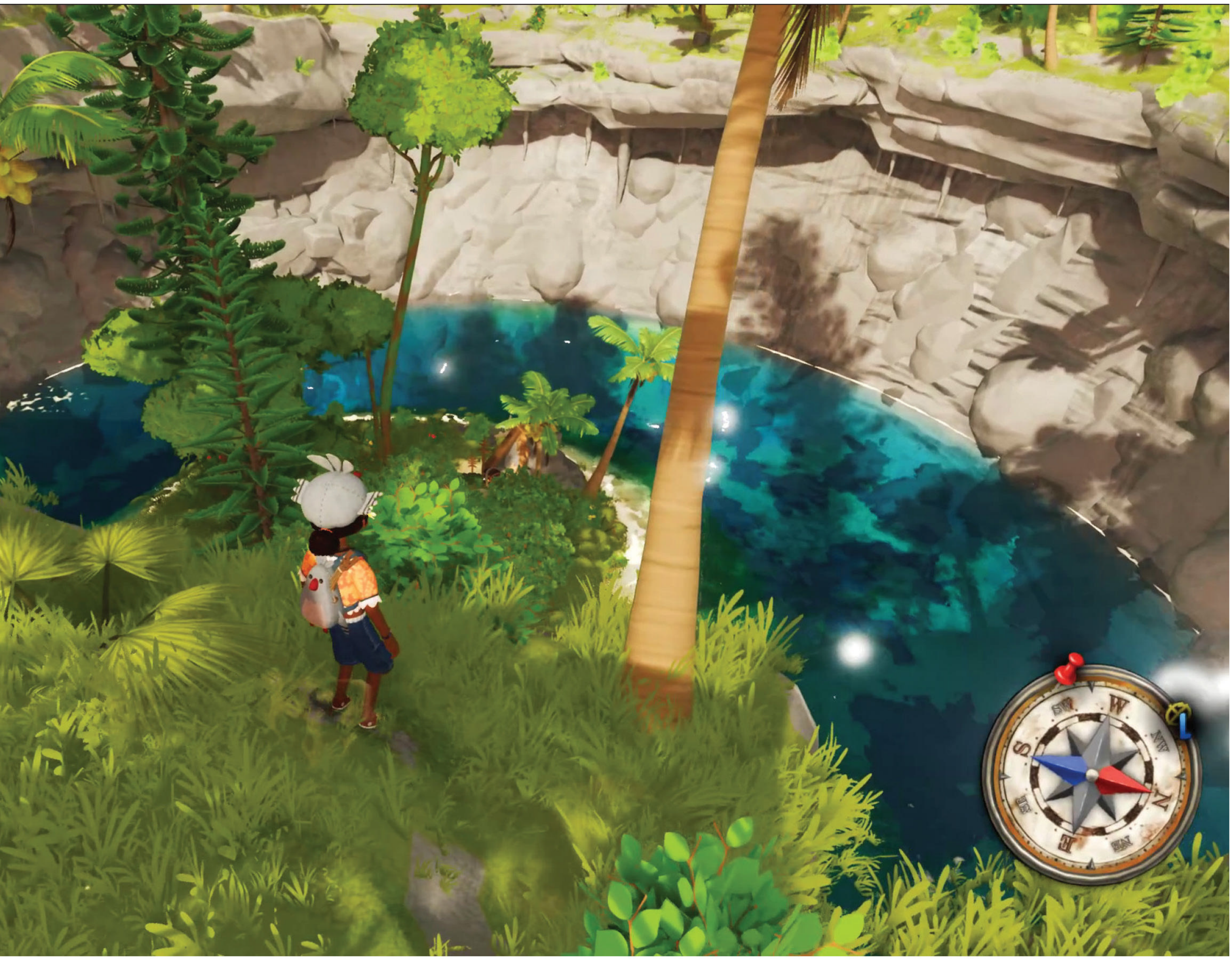
Despite several long sessions of the *Tchia* beta ranging all over the single island, I feel like I've only found a portion of the mysteries and wonders it hides, and I can't wait to dive in completely when *Tchia* releases later this year. It feels like a love letter to the real-life island, packed with details about its people and culture – even the voice actors are locals of New Caledonia. I'm eager to keep exploring the beautiful and diverse world and uncovering more of its treasures.

Christopher Livingston

TCHIA IS LIKE SPIDER-MAN CROSSED WITH CORVO ATTANO, ONLY SHE'S A KID



Tchia can glide over the island... as long as she has stamina.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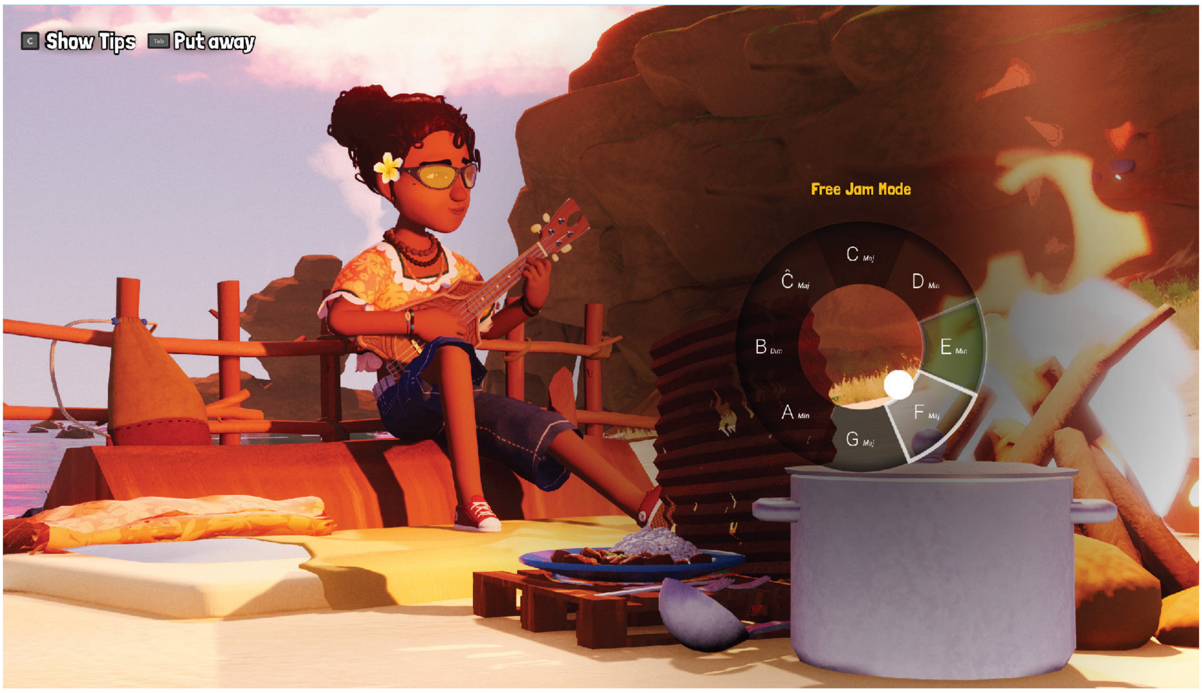
C Show Tips
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ABOVE: Secret grottos and caves give you new places to explore.

LEFT: Campfires are places to rest, change clothing, and jam.

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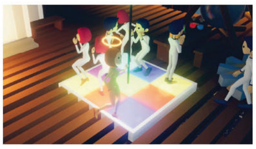


NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Q2 2023	YYZ	Different Tales	differenttales.com/havendock

HAVENDOCK

Build a thriving town on the ocean in this cosy colony sim

You wake up on a tiny island in the middle of the ocean. Your first impulse might be to escape, maybe by crafting a boat. But if you're playing *Havendock*, escape is the last thing on your mind. Don't flee the ocean. Live there by building an entire town on it.

At first *Havendock* feels a bit like survival game *Raft*: I'm standing on a few tiny squares of wood with water all around me, and I need to grab floating leaves, wooden planks, and fish from the ocean to use for resources. Unlike *Raft*, though, my base isn't moving through the water but anchored to the tiny sandy island I woke up on.

PLAYED IT

BUILDING

Soon I'm able to build more sections of dock, and the space quickly becomes filled with crafting stations. I set up a pump to draw seawater up to the dock, and a purifier to make it drinkable. I build birdhouses to attract feathered visitors which will give me seeds for farming plots, and feed them fish in return. (Don't tell those friendly birds this, but I also built a steel trap to catch different birds to harvest for feathers and bones.) I burn wood for charcoal to power cooking stations, and a research table lets me open up new tech like smelting. Every scrap of spare wood lets me extend my dock further to make more room and try to build my way over to other tiny islands and structures nearby. I see one across the water that has chickens. I want them.

IT'S NOT ALL SMOOTH SAILING: A FEW OF MY SETTLERS HAVE INJURED THEMSELVES

It's not long before a curious NPC sails over on a tiny raft. He's interested in joining my colony, provided I build him a house. I don't even have a house myself yet, but I research the new building and add it to the dock while he waits. Once he's settled, I assign him to pump water. And that's where I discover one of the great things about *Havendock*: making settlers do all the chores I don't want to do myself.

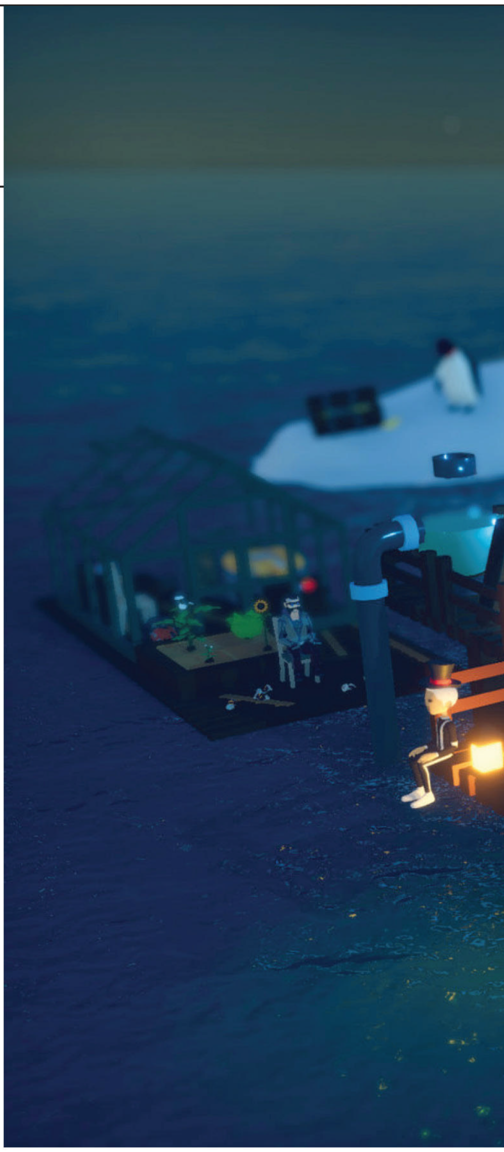
Pretty soon I've got five settlers living on my sprawling dock and I'm making them do the stuff I'm not interested in. One is building up my steel and glass resources by scuba diving to the sea floor to gather ore and sand, and then feeding it into my forge and hammering it into shape. I've got another settler on seed duty so I can have my farms growing fresh food without needing to supervise them. I've assigned someone else to cook meals for everyone. It's a pretty good system where I can run around building, crafting and expanding without getting swamped in other chores that others can do.

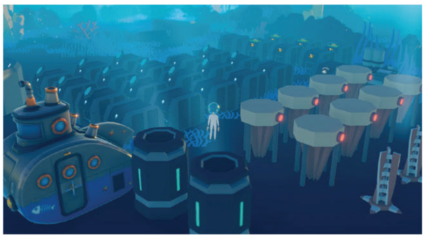
INJURIES

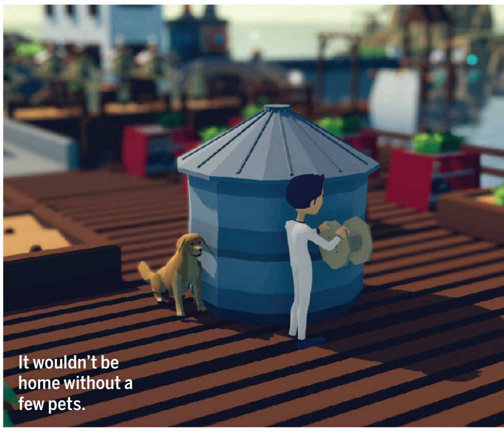
It's not all smooth sailing: a few of my settlers have injured themselves in the course of the workday, and I myself was struck by lightning, right in the dang head, during a rainstorm, which puts researching herbs and medicine at the top of my to-do list. There's some enjoyable silliness in *Havendock*, too. When I need raw meat I don't raise livestock and butcher them, I just grow burgers in my garden. Complete hamburgers! With buns and cheese and everything, growing right out of the soil. It doesn't make sense, but it's pretty darn charming, as is just about everything else in *Havendock*.

There's also a lot I haven't seen yet: the full game will include underwater systems for pumping oil, and rowboats and submarines for exploring areas beyond the town. I'm really enjoying the colony builder so far, and I'm especially impressed that it's the work of solo-developer Yeo Ying Zhi (aka YYZ). *Havendock* is due to launch into Early Access in Q2 of 2023.

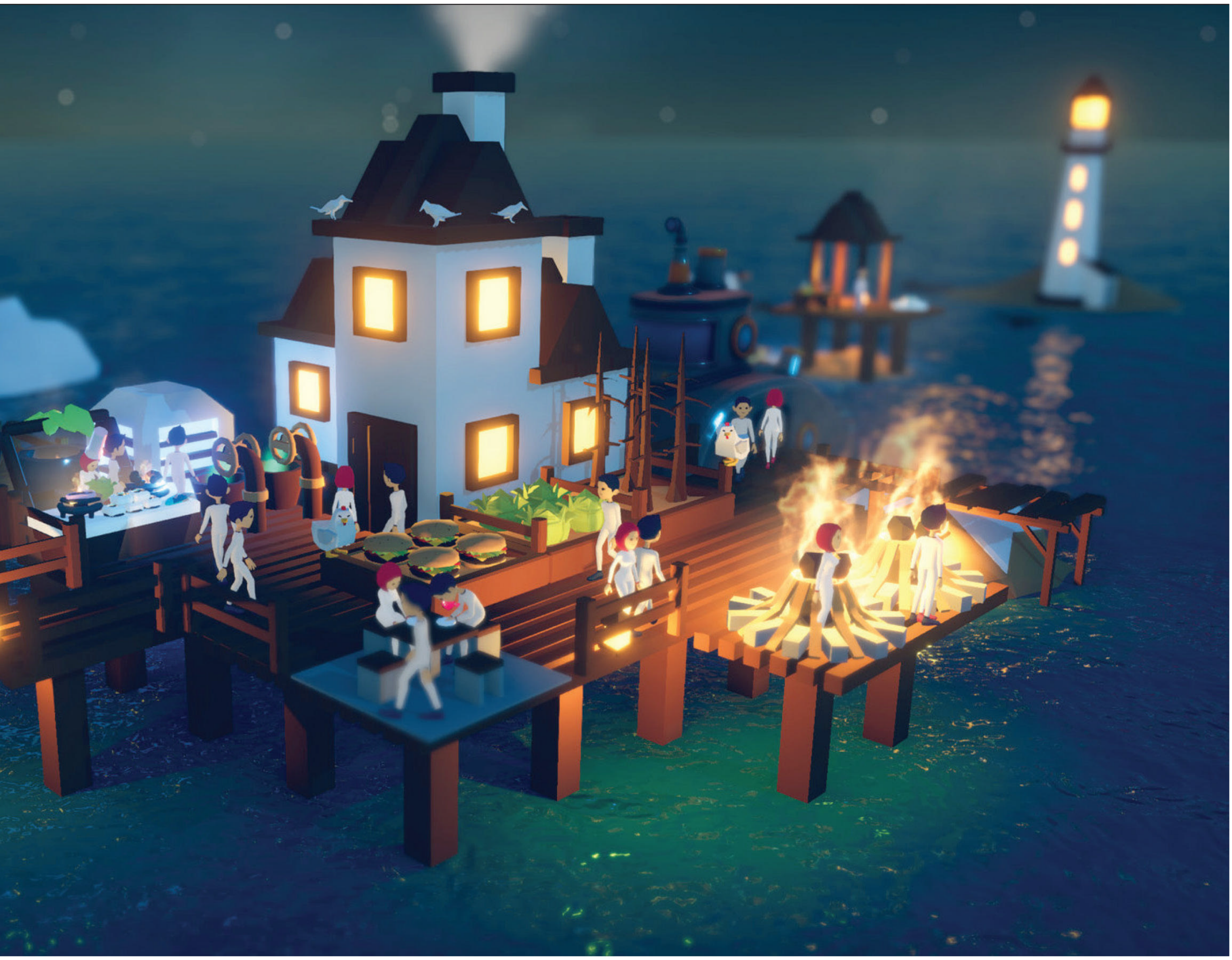
Chris Livingston

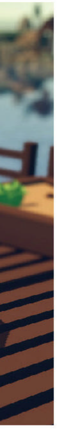


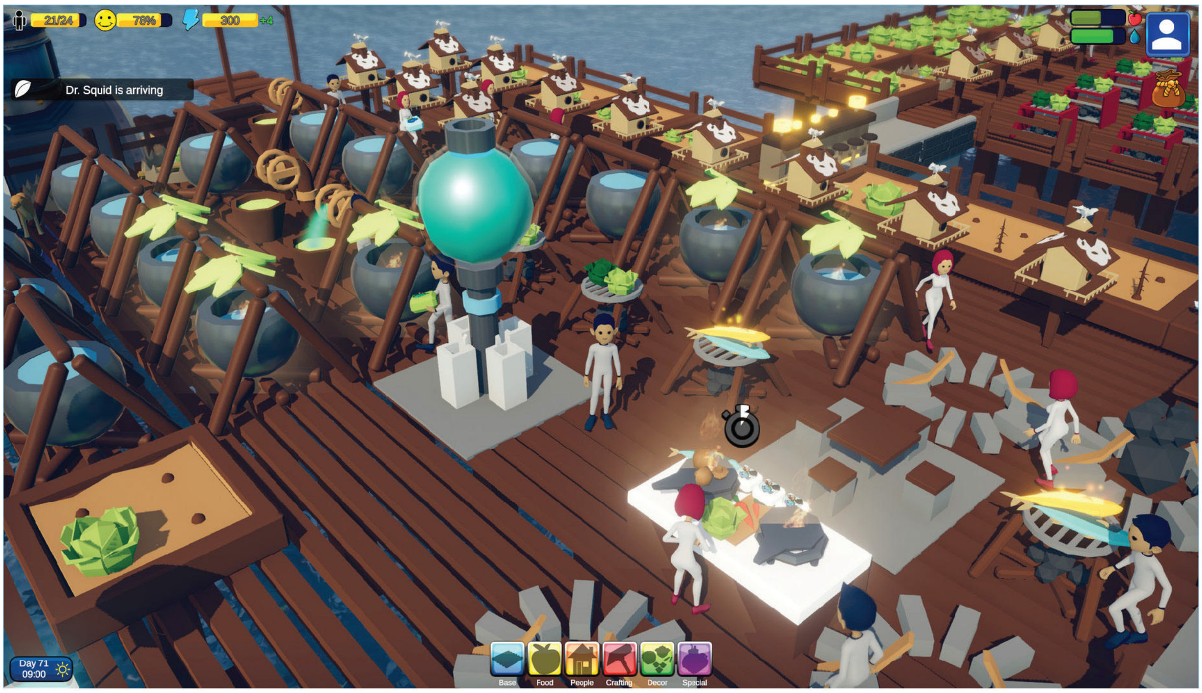




It wouldn't be home without a few pets.



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Base
Food
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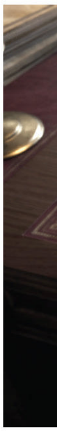
Dr. Squid is arriving

ABOVE: Turn a tiny dock into a charming little town.

LEFT: Create supply chains, and assign settlers to work them.

ABOVE: There doesn't seem to be any combat, parkour, or QTEs in this one, which is a relief.

RIGHT: Sherlock Holmes & The Case of the World's Worst Fishing Holiday.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Early 2023	Frogwares	In-house	sherlockholmes.one

SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE AWAKENED

The world's most iconic detective cross-examines an evil doll

After 20 years and nine *Sherlock Holmes* games, Ukrainian studio Frogwares has established itself as the champion of making games about one of literature's stuffiest Englishmen. The course of the series hasn't always run smooth, but that's never stopped Frogwares. It may be that nothing can stop them, as it's making its latest game in an active war zone.

After a Kickstarter last summer to shore up funds, the studio has been hard at work on *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened*, a full remake of a game it first released in 2007. The idea is that it's a smaller, faster project the team can focus on amongst the chaos of the Russia-Ukraine war – the plot and cases are already mapped out, and mechanically it picks up right where the most recent game, *Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One*, left off.

It certainly doesn't feel modest in the slice I've played, though. *The Awakened* doesn't have the open-world scale of *Chapter One*, but it's far from just a prettied up version of the original. The beats of the plot are the same, but that's pretty much it – it looks and feels modern, and the characters, mysteries and situations have all been rethought and, in many cases, completely changed.

That plot, by the way, is a crossover between Sherlock Holmes and the mythos of HP Lovecraft – the public domain property equivalent of a peanut butter and jam sandwich. Holmes, the investigator who never lets up and always finds the answers, ploughs headfirst into a world where the answers don't make sense and the curious are driven mad. Watch the indescribable sparks fly.

CHARACTERS, MYSTERIES AND SITUATIONS HAVE ALL BEEN RETHOUGHT

HOLMES IMPROVEMENT

My hands-on time starts with Watson and Holmes arriving at a creepy asylum, where queasy close-ups give even the initial introductions at the front desk a camp horror atmosphere. The whole demo walks a line between scary and funny that serves as welcome flavour for the more serious business of investigation.

Further into the asylum, I cross-examine a patient who believes her evil doll talks to her. At first, I'm uncomfortable – there's repeated stereotyping of mental health issues here in a way that feels sorely outdated, even in the horror genre. But then the camera zooms in jerkily to the doll's face, and suddenly Sherlock is interrogating the toy itself as it responds in rasping screeches. Trying to catch the little terror in a lie by presenting the right evidence is so wonderfully bizarre it's hard not to be won over – particularly in the ambiguity of what is genuinely supernatural, and what is merely Sherlock playing along.

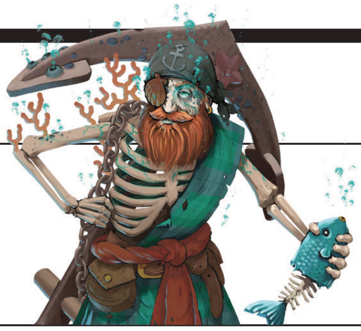
PLAYED IT

Between such odd interactions, the meat of the game is, as you'd expect, investigation. For the most part this demo sees me creeping around the asylum's lower levels, pawing through everything from files to lockers in search of clues. As you gather information by exploring the scene, notes are added to your casebook, with icons next to them indicating how they might be developed further.

I didn't get to dive too much into the larger Lovecraftian conspiracy during the demo, but what I did uncover has me eager to dig deeper. In this slice at least, the game feels far from a compromised or budget project – it's a natural progression from *Chapter One* with plenty of intriguingly weird hooks. It has to be a surreal feeling building occult mysteries while real, human horror happens in the city around you, but it doesn't seem like Frogwares' circumstances are going to stop it releasing another ambitious and clever detective game.

Robin Valentine

Evil dolls are a little played out, but you have to admit this is a really creepy looking one.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2023	Mimimi Games	In-house	shadowgambit.com

SHADOW GAMBIT

The Desperados 3 team wants you to lead an undead pirate crew

A third of the way through *Desperados 3*, the Wild West gets a bit weird. There's magic! Animal possession. Mind control. Living creatures can be linked together *Dishonored*-style. These occult shenanigans are a consistent highlight and demand a follow-up. *Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew*, the team's latest project, is more than happy to oblige.

FIRST LOOK

This is the golden age of piracy, but not as we know it. In this alternate history, death has taken on a new meaning for the pirate crews that sail the high seas. In a nod to Pirates of the Caribbean, Captain Afia is on a mission to gather a crew of undead ne'er-do-wells, using magical artefacts known as Black Pearls to transform them into their best selves – all in an effort to pull off a big heist and thwart the forces of some anti-magic killjoys: the Inquisition of the Burning Maiden.

DEAD SEA

The foundation established in *Shadow Tactics* back in 2016 – itself a riff on the classic *Commandos* series – remains intact. You'll command your crew of undead pirates in real-time missions, viewing the action from a top-down perspective, all while avoiding guards with their large but easily-obscured vision cones. Completing the tricky missions necessitates creative use of your crew's eclectic abilities, as well as the environment itself, and save scumming is very much expected. But this new setting brings with it a lot of new ideas and twists on familiar mechanics.

COMPLETING THE MISSIONS NECESSITATES CREATIVE USE OF YOUR CREW'S ABILITIES

"In our previous games that had a more realistic setting, we were super limited in what we could do in terms of the character skills, the mechanics and gameplay," says communications lead Matthias Kraut. "But now with *Shadow Gambit* we go full fantasy and magic; this means we have ghost ships, a magical world and cursed pirates with supernatural abilities, which gives us a lot of freedom to design meaningful, crazy new mechanics."

Take Captain Afia, for instance. She's got a sword embedded in her chest, which she can rip out to let her ignore the rules of space and time, dashing forward to impale enemies in the blink of an eye. Other crewmates include Mr Mercury, a skeleton with a magical anchor that opens up portals to the Shadow Seas, effectively letting him hide from enemies whenever he wants or teleport to hard-to-reach places. His best friend is a fish, Sir Reginald, who also lends a fin by distracting enemies. Then there's Gaëlle, who carries around a big cannon that can suck up and launch both allies and enemies. On their own, these abilities seem pretty damn handy, but they're also designed to synergise with the abilities of their crewmates, letting you pull off elaborate attacks all at once, solving multiple problems in one fell swoop.

This is where your ship comes into play. The Red Marley is a ghost ship – you can tell because it's covered in bones and has an ominous glow – with a living soul, and along with being your mobile HQ and an important character in her own right, she can also help out during missions. While *Shadow Gambit* is a real-time affair, through The Red Marley you can freeze, speed up and reset time. Along with giving you opportunities to set up some flashy moves, this also serves as *Shadow Gambit*'s take on save scumming.

CAST AWAY

"The fantasy magic aspect allows us to change the whole flavour and the narration around the quick-save, quick-load mechanics," says Kraut. Instead of being a mechanic that exists outside of the game-world, it's firmly embedded in the story. "The characters

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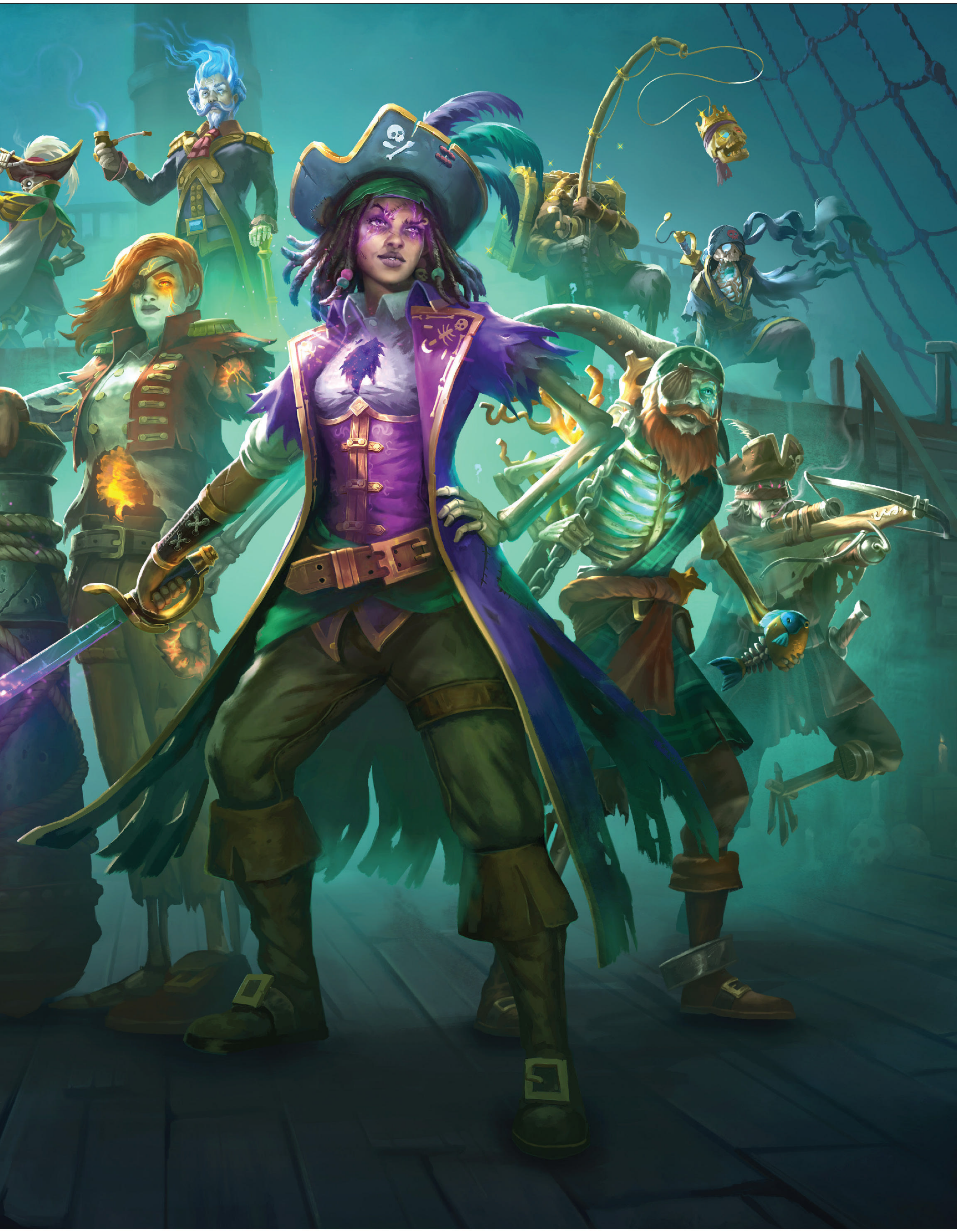

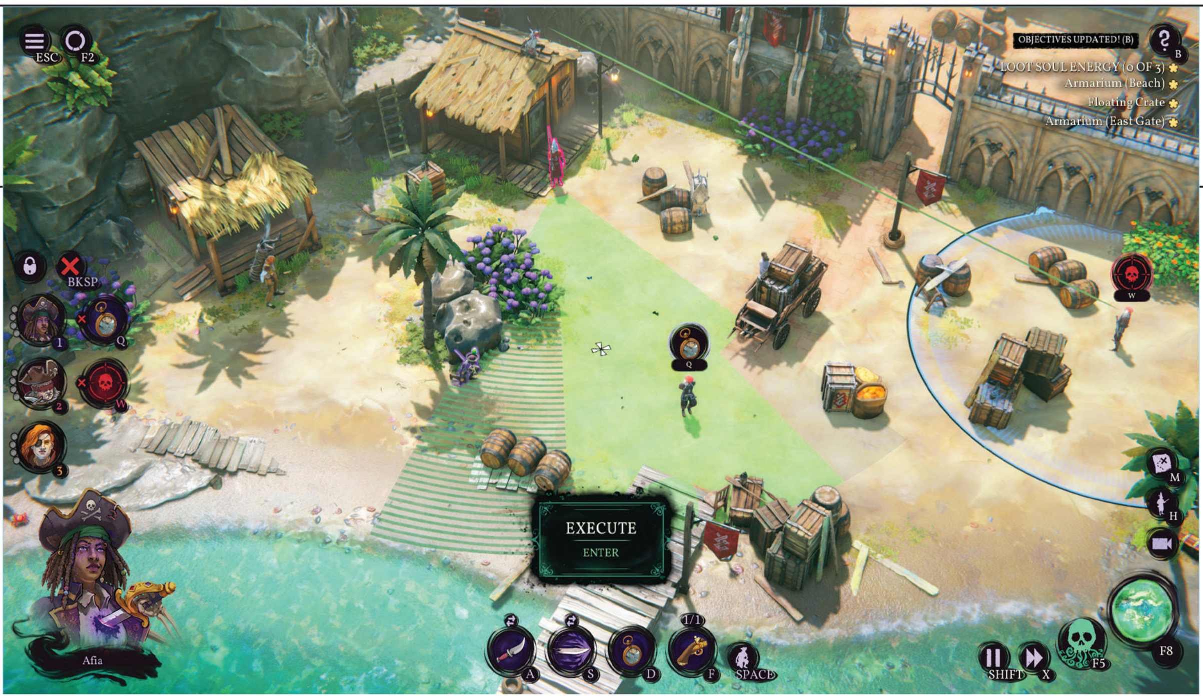
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F2
OBJECTIVES UPDATED! (B)
B
LOOT SOUL ENERGY (0 OF 3)
Armarium (Beach)
Floating Crate
Armarium (East Gate)
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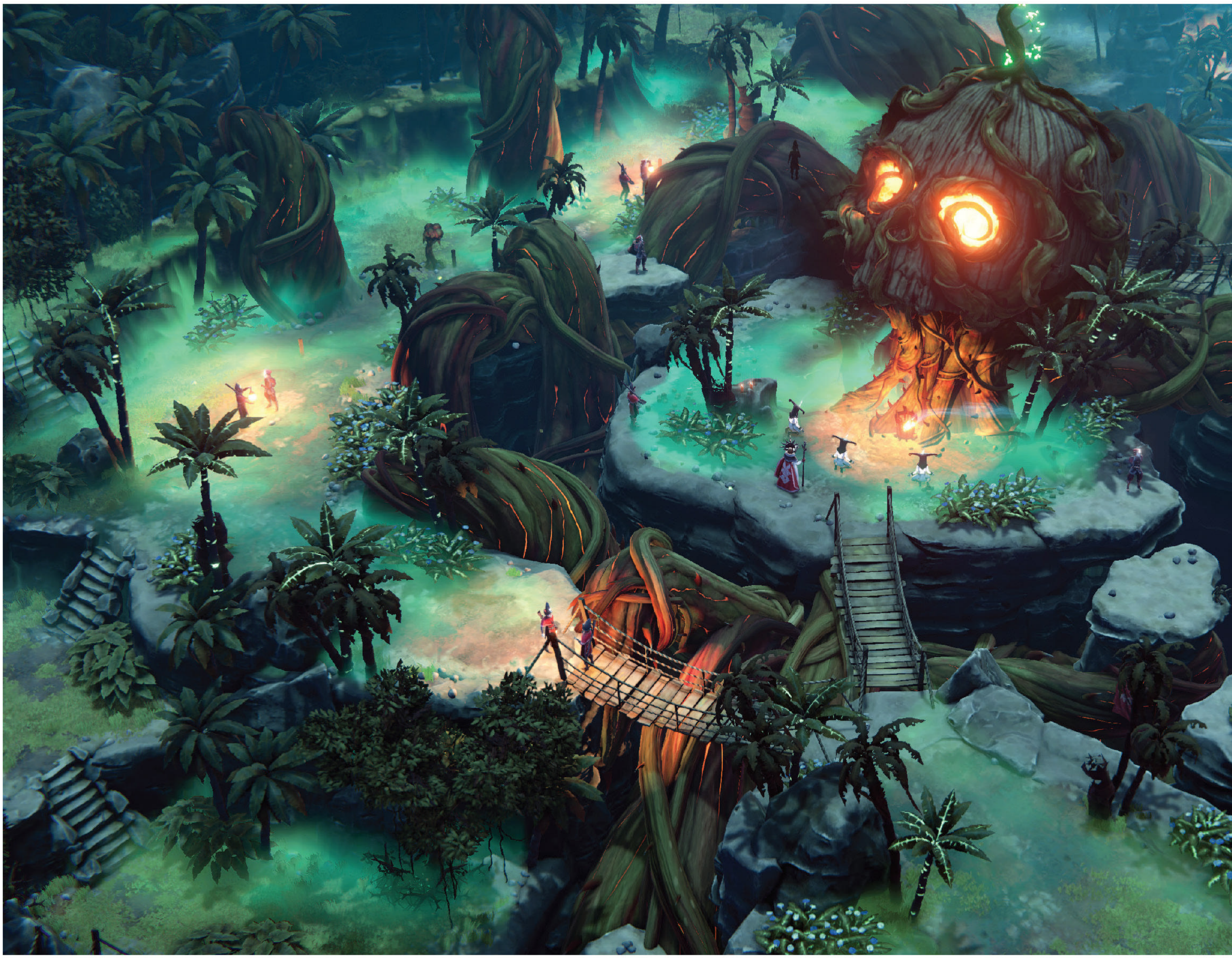
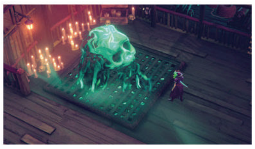
1
Q
2
W
3
Afia
EXECUTE
ENTER
A
S
D
1/1
F
SPACE
SHIFT
X
F5
F8
M
H

RIGHT: Beaches are probably great for hiding dead bodies.

BELOW: Is it a real pirate adventure if there aren't ominous skulls everywhere?



This looks like a great spot for a quick D&D game.



will even react to you using that feature. So, for example, if you're in a challenging situation and you have to rewind the same moment in time with The Marley's power very often, a character might comment on this, or perhaps cheer you or themselves up in that situation."

Mimimi has always encouraged liberal use of save scumming, which in turn encourages experimentation and gives you a more manageable route to a flawless run. Here, though, that support is so much more overt. And there's no limit to your use of these powers.

"This is the same as in *Shadow Tactics* and *Desperados*," says creative director and studio founder Dominik Abè. "It's unlimited and there's no penalty. We think it's a core aspect of those types of games." Even as a hardcore stealth fan, Abè sees this mechanic as essential, especially if you want to get through a mission without being spotted once. "For that you really need to reload. We think it's really liberating to just do that as often as you want and just experiment and come up with crazy ideas. So there's nothing we want to punish there. And those games are still super challenging, so there's nothing we think takes away the fun – we think it's really increasing it."

It's another tool in your arsenal rather than a crutch. But it's not the only way to get out of a tricky situation. "I love it that I'm not forced to quick-load again because I messed something up," says Kraut. "I feel like now I can just be like, 'Let's see what happens – I can still get out of this situation when I get discovered.' For example, with Mr Mercury and his anchor you can just hide underground and maybe wait until the alert is over."

Controlling a mobile HQ also means that the traditional linear series of missions is out, replaced by something significantly more flexible. While the story is split up into multiple acts, you can tackle missions, visit islands and unlock crewmates in whatever order you fancy.

ISLAND GETAWAY

Islands contain multiple missions, undertaken one at a time. Within those missions is even more flexibility. It's up to you where on the island you want to begin the mission, and when you first arrive you won't have to immediately pick the crewmembers that you bring with you – you can do a bit of scouting first. Abè offers an example where you might notice a lot of watchtowers, which might inspire you to bring a sharpshooter along.

Each island promises to be a chunky sandbox with no predetermined best route. And while *Shadow Gambit* is absolutely a stealth game, it's not one where you will be forced to be as silent as a ghost. While the studio's previous games have allowed you to approach certain situations with guns blazing, an aggressive playstyle seems even more viable here thanks to death becoming somewhat inconsequential. Losing a crewmember is only a temporary setback, since these walking corpses can be revived.

This more aggressive approach to stealth, and the roguishness of the cast, does mean one system from *Desperados 3* has fallen by the wayside: social stealth. Mimimi's cowboy sequel introduced neutral areas where the party could wander around looking for opportunities for mischief without being constantly harassed by enemies. Conceptually it was great, but there wasn't much room for experimentation. I would have loved to have seen it developed more, but I can understand the team's desire to move onto new pastures.

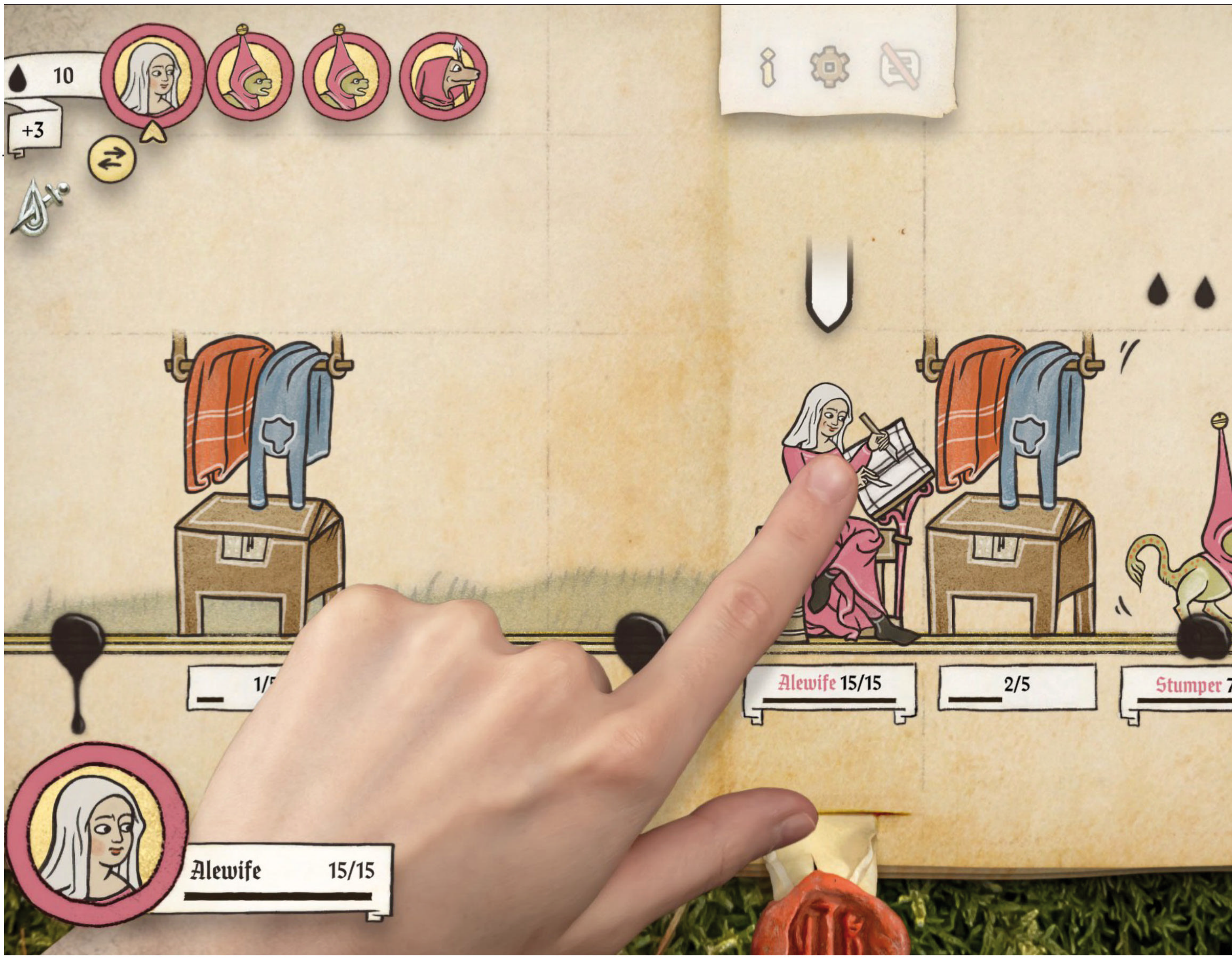
EACH ISLAND PROMISES TO BE A CHUNKY SANDBOX WITH NO PREDETERMINED BEST ROUTE

SHIPSHAPE

If you still crave moments where you aren't being hounded by the Inquisition, there's always the ship. While you're hanging out on The Red Marley, you can chat to your crew and get to know them better – a bunch of undead weirdos are bound to have some good stories to tell – or just explore the ship herself. "The Marley is bigger on the inside – way bigger – so there's some stuff to do there," says Abè. It's slightly evocative of *Mass Effect*, and this isn't the only nod to RPGs. Your crew's personal stories also lead to unique, character-driven missions, because what is friendship if not a willingness to commit some thefts, murders or piracy on your pal's behalf?

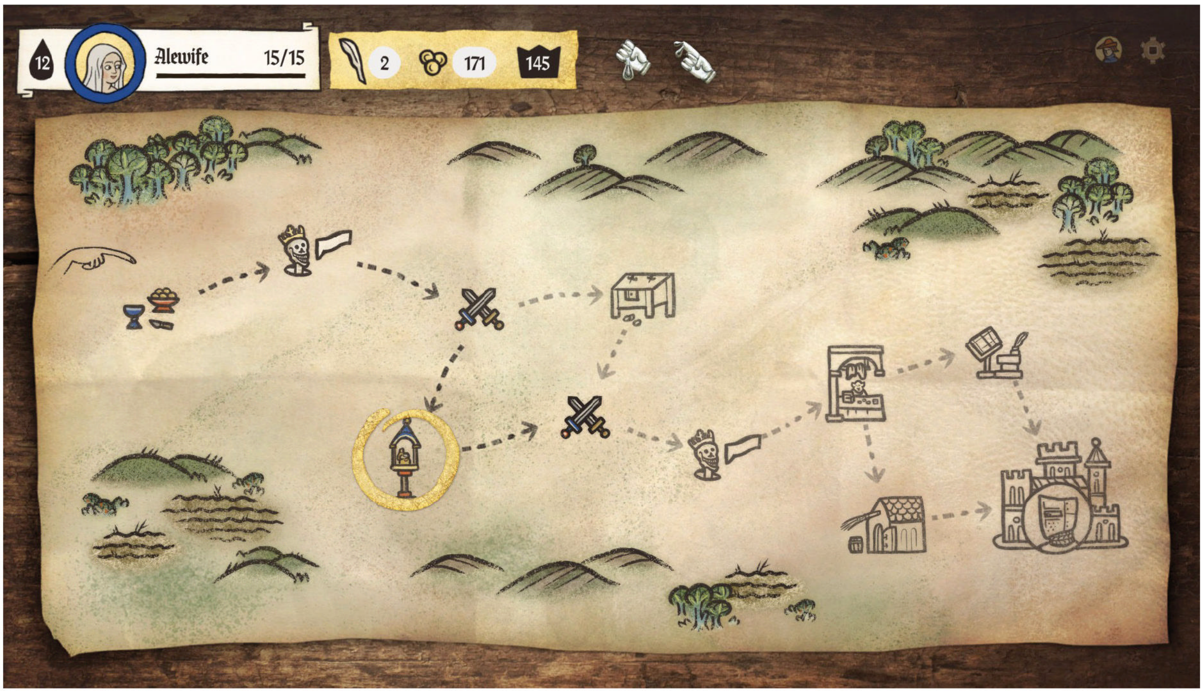
Mimimi could have offered us more of the same and I would have absolutely been content, but *Shadow Gambit* appears to be jam-packed with novelties and playful twists. We'll see if it all pays off later this year, but in the meantime it sounds like it has the potential to be the studio's best stealthy adventure yet.

Fraser Brown


10
+3
1/
Alewife 15/15
2/5
Stumper
Alewife 15/15

ABOVE: Furniture can act as cover from long-range attacks.

RIGHT: The map includes stops to buy new units and level up.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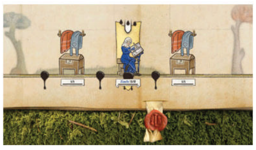


NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
January 31, 2023	Yaza Games	Daedelic Entertainment	yazagames.com

INKULINATI

Rabbits, dogs and donkeys take to the turn-based battlefield

Inkulinati forces us to confront one of humanity's great universal concerns, demanding answers to a question that's tormented civilisations for millennia: are farts funny? Polish developer Yaza Games certainly thinks so, packing its turn-based strategy roguelite with flatulent units that reveal their posteriors to opponents, then rasp out clouds of noxious gas.

If you think that sounds terribly puerile, however, *Inkulinati*'s fart gags are at least appropriate to its setting. The soldiers you command, you see, are faithful reproductions of medieval 'marginalia' – bizarre sketches penned around the edges of fine manuscripts – which often indulged base humour that thumbed its nose at tradition and hierarchy, depicting snails as deadly predators, for instance, and brave knights as anthropomorphised rabbits. With that in mind, a fart in *Inkulinati* may be a cheap joke, but such low-brow hijinks equally aim at reducing prince and pauper to the same level.

DRESSED TO QUILL

It definitely helps as well, though, that once the fumes have cleared, *Inkulinati* is a cunning little strategy game. The twist here is that battles play out on the double-page surface of an open book, with your beastly units drawn into existence by giant hands. The characters attached to these hands – the titular Inkulinati – are themselves represented on the battlefield by an avatar, through which you call on the hand either to produce new units using a limited supply of ink, or shift units around, give healing massages to allies, and so on.

YOU WORK THROUGH BRANCHING MAPS TOWARDS BOSS ENCOUNTERS

That said, it's your inky infantry that do most of the work. In each run of the story mode, you work through branching maps towards boss encounters, recruiting exotic creatures to add to your starting line-up, and selecting up to five types to enter the next skirmish. Battles are divided into chapters in which all units on the page act once, with player and opponent taking turns to call on a single unit of their choice. Basic unit types – sword, spear, bow – attack from different ranges, and also have species-dependent supplementary skills.

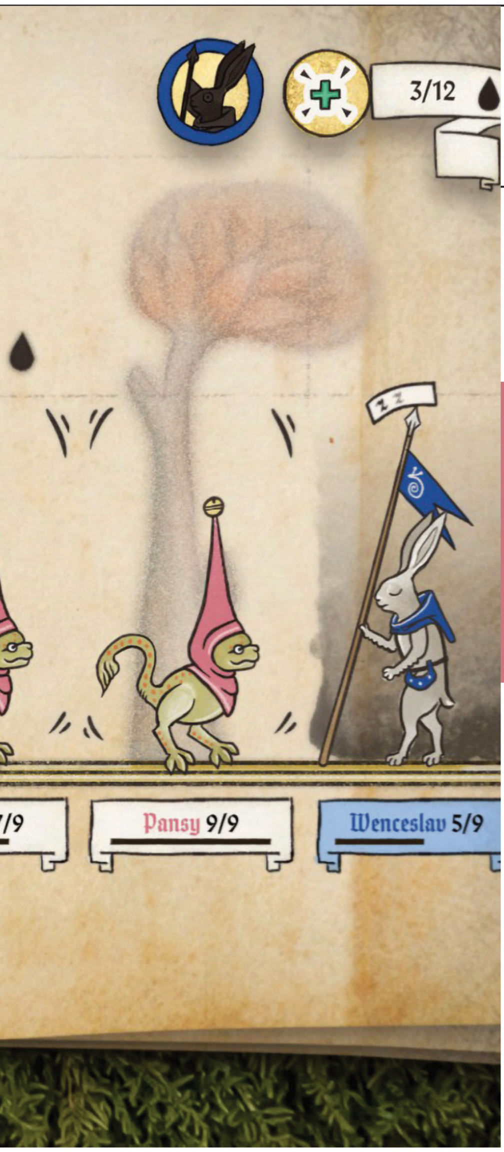
At first, the two-dimensional squeeze of the page can feel constricting as you try to exchange blows, with units often blocking each other's way. But it soon becomes apparent that the lack of room to manoeuvre is precisely what makes *Inkulinati* scraps densely tactical. Moving a unit to attack another can have major repercussions, since your rival may be able to exploit the gap you leave behind. In particular, you should guard against enemy units using their push ability, which shoves an adjacent unit away, forcing it to slide across the page until it reaches an empty space or, if there isn't one, slips to its doom off the edge of the play area. Even your avatar is susceptible here, and given that you lose the battle if they die, it's possible to leave yourself vulnerable to a quick checkmate.

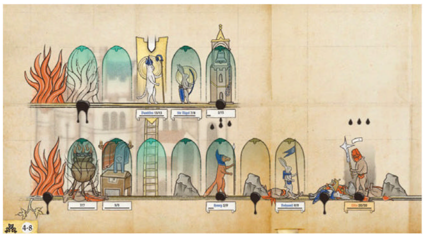
PLAYED IT

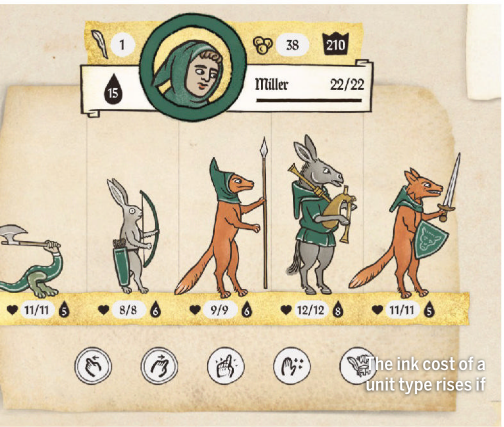
With plenty of other variables to consider besides, *Inkulinati* thus already feels quite bountiful, and offers a robust, glitch-free experience to boot. It is, however, less sure-footed when it comes to balancing its elements, with plenty of creases that need ironing out. Most egregiously, the randomised level layouts can lead to wild difficulty swings, with oddly trivial maps one minute followed by absolute killers the next. The compact arenas, meanwhile, can get very cluttered, and it's a little too easy to make an erroneous click with dire consequences.

Still, despite this initial wonkiness, there's already plenty to like about *Inkulinati*, regardless of whether you warm to its methane-infused humour.

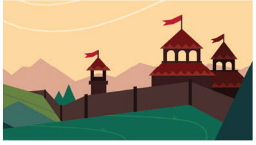
Jon Bailes







The ink cost of a unit type rises if



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
March 2, 2023	Tributary Games	Team17	bit.ly/3l1km8v

KING OF THE CASTLE

Heavy is the head that wears the crown

I've just gnawed my way through half a chicken in a castle's great banqueting hall and, as a noble of the realm, I've now got a serious decision to make. Should I vote to have the kingdom's new king crowned in a lavish coronation ceremony? Or, instead, should I vote to just throw him in the river?

So begins my preview play session of Tributary Games' fascinating new title, *King of the Castle*, a medieval-themed multiplayer party game that leans heavily into player interaction with a unique blend of voting, narrative storytelling and outright Pratchettian silliness.

The game works like this. One player, who is the instigator and streamer of the game, plays a kingdom's new king, while everyone else joining the game play the kingdom's Nobles of the Council, which stem from a hatful of noble households.

From this point the game progresses through a series of selectable in-game events, which themselves are contained with seasons, and each chosen event gives the king and the nobles the chance to sculpt the direction of the kingdom. An event typically involves storytelling, followed by some sort of vote, with the king and players picking from a range of options each time.

Where things get properly interesting, though, is that each faction in the game has their own win conditions based on the decisions they, as a faction, choose. And these win conditions can differ between factions, causing the potential for conflict. For example, my king in the preview session chooses an event that requires two new civic constructions to be chosen, and each potential build brings with it certain stat benefits to the kingdom. Build a monument, for example, and the realm's authority goes up, while building a deer park causes its farming stat to go down.

And, well, if the Barons of the March faction's success is tied to getting the realm's farming stat going down, while the Chiefs of the North faction's success needs authority to go up, you can see how votes can get messy and, more importantly, tactical.

In my preview session I watched on as the king tried to desperately produce offspring while dealing with increasingly mad events, all the while noble factions tried to outmanoeuvre each other to claim the kingdom for themselves.

YOU CAN SEE HOW VOTES CAN GET MESSY AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, TACTICAL

KING MAKER

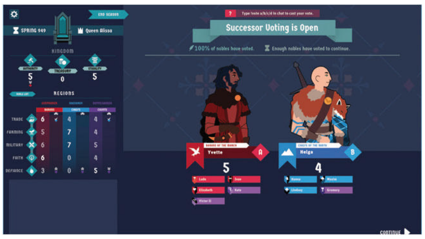
Spiralling, branching decisions lead to choices made seasons ago affecting both what events are available in the present and also how they pan out. For example, if a kingdom votes to solve an economic problem in the present by printing a load of money, then boy you better be ready for the potential for hyperinflation to raise its head in the future, itself possibly affecting later events and outcomes.

PLAYED IT

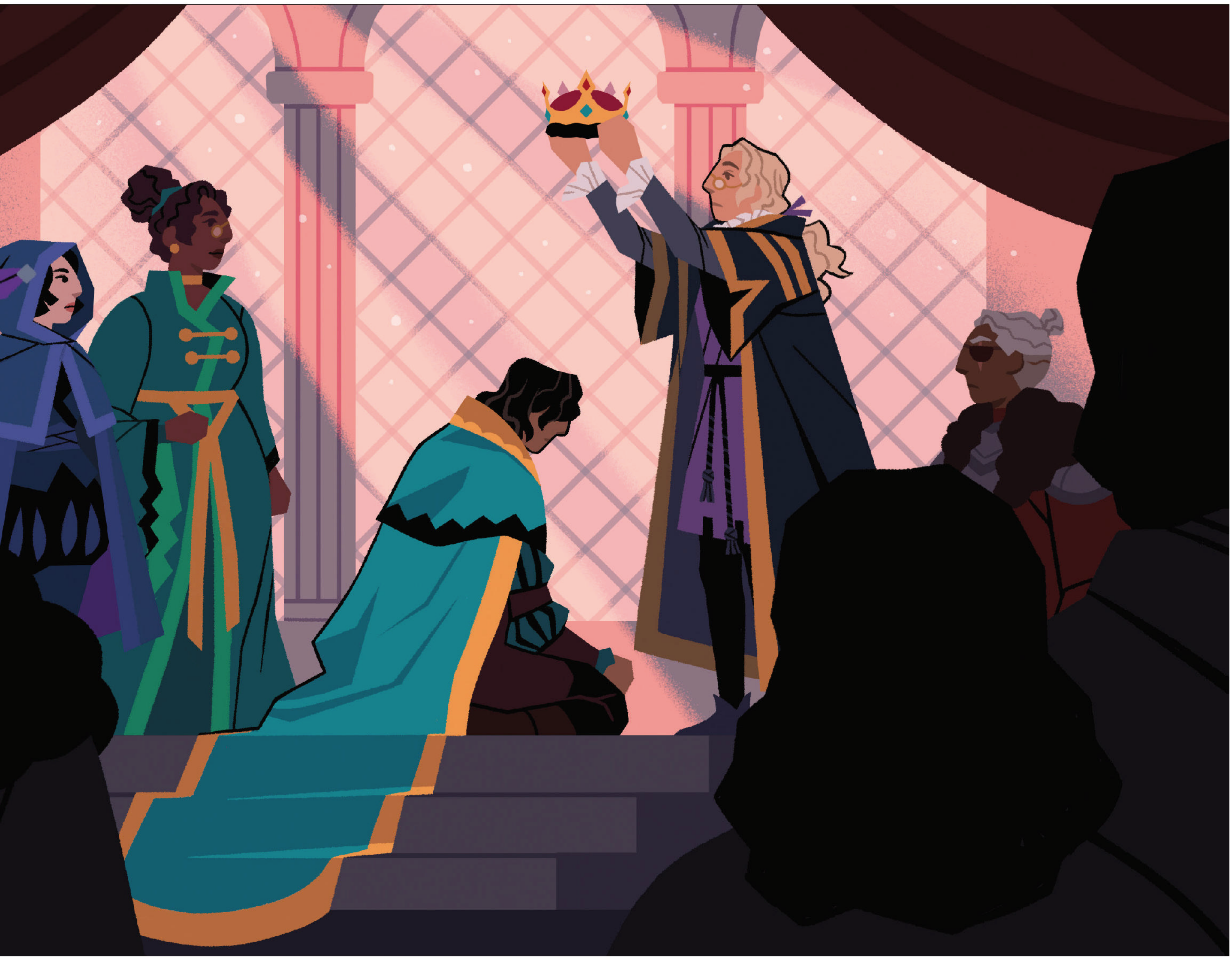
While *King of the Castle* is quite a simple game visually, with 2D cartoon characters interacting on backgrounds, and events chosen from a simple top-down isometric map of the kingdom, the mechanical structures underneath are far from it, with a complex web of intermeshing systems communicating with each other to react to each gameplay session. Indeed, there's over 900,000 lines of content currently, which gives a snapshot of the scale of its backend.

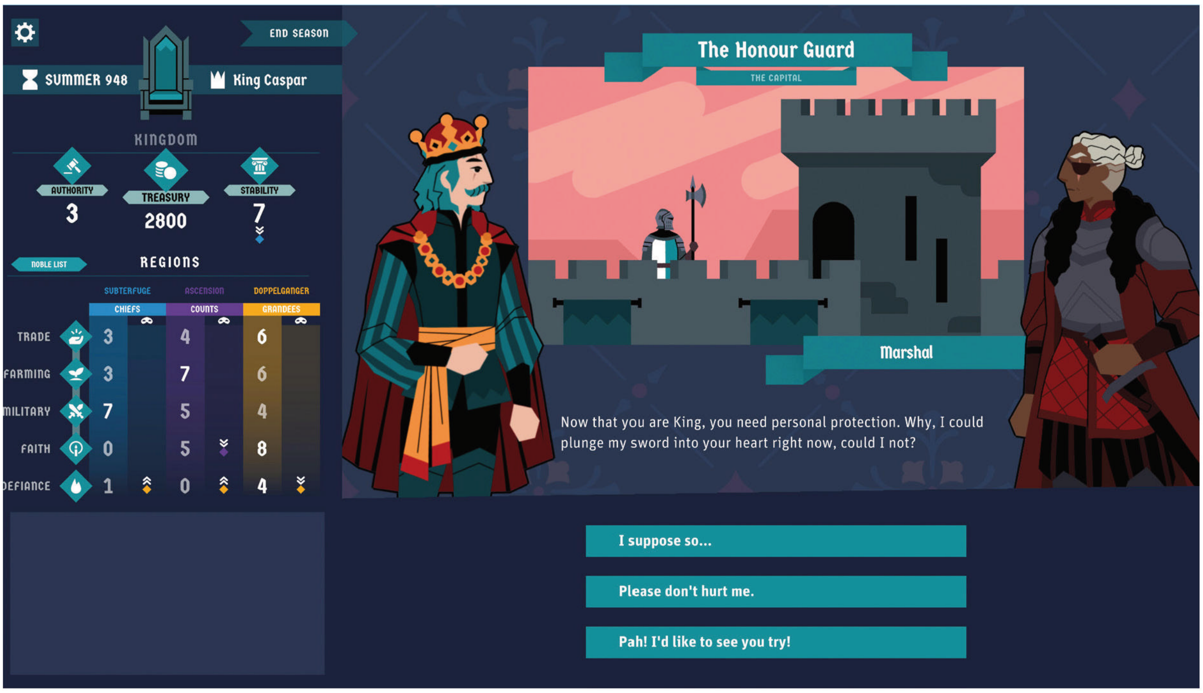
Throw in an almost DnD-style potential for light role play, board game session play timings, and streamer-friendly Twitch integration, and it's easy to see how *King of the Castle* could really take off when it launches. As, while my preview session ended before a full game was completed, I had a load of fun and could see big potential for the game.

Robert Jones



THE CAPITAL
Council Introduction
The Path to Victory
Coronation
THE SOUTH
THE EAST
THE MARCH





SUMMER 948

King Caspar

KINGDOM

AUTHORITY	TREASURY	STABILITY
3	2800	7 ▼

REGIONS

	SUBTERFUGE CHIEFS		ASCENSION COUNTS		DOPPELGANGER GRANDEES	
TRADE	3		4		6	
FARMING	3		7		6	
MILITARY	7		5		4	
FAITH	0		5	▼	8	
DEFIANCE	1	▲	0	▲	4	▼

The Honour Guard

THE CAPITAL

Marshal

Now that you are King, you need personal protection. Why, I could plunge my sword into your heart right now, could I not?

- I suppose so...
- Please don't hurt me.
- Pah! I'd like to see you try!

ABOVE: As king you can try to rule your kingdom as you see fit.

LEFT: Each in-game faction has win conditions tied to kingdom stats.

CROWN DUEL

How **THE DUVIRI PARADOX** will unite old and new *Warframe* players

By Samantha Greer

The problem with most big on-going service games is that they eventually reach a critical mass where the up-front investment is too big for new players. *Destiny 2* suffers with this, deleting old expansions and content such that there's no way for a new player to coherently follow the story without watching lore videos on YouTube. *Warframe* might just have a solution, by turning the past into the future with its upcoming update, which is functionally a stand alone expansion.

Warframe fans have been looking forward to *The Duviri Paradox* for a long time. First announced in 2019, four years ago, the excitement has only grown as each story update between then and now has added complication after complication to our understanding of what *Duviri* is. If you're someone who has never played *Warframe* or found it too intimidating to start, then *Duviri* is for you too. Creating an opening for new players has been at the forefront of creative director Rebecca Ford's mind as development on the update evolved. What can players expect? "You can imagine hearing about *Warframe*, doing a fresh install and then the Lotus will ask you, 'Do you wish to play with blade and gun or do you wish to experience the paradox?' Of course she'll tell you all paths will connect but the 'Void needs you now, where will you start?'"

START AT THE END

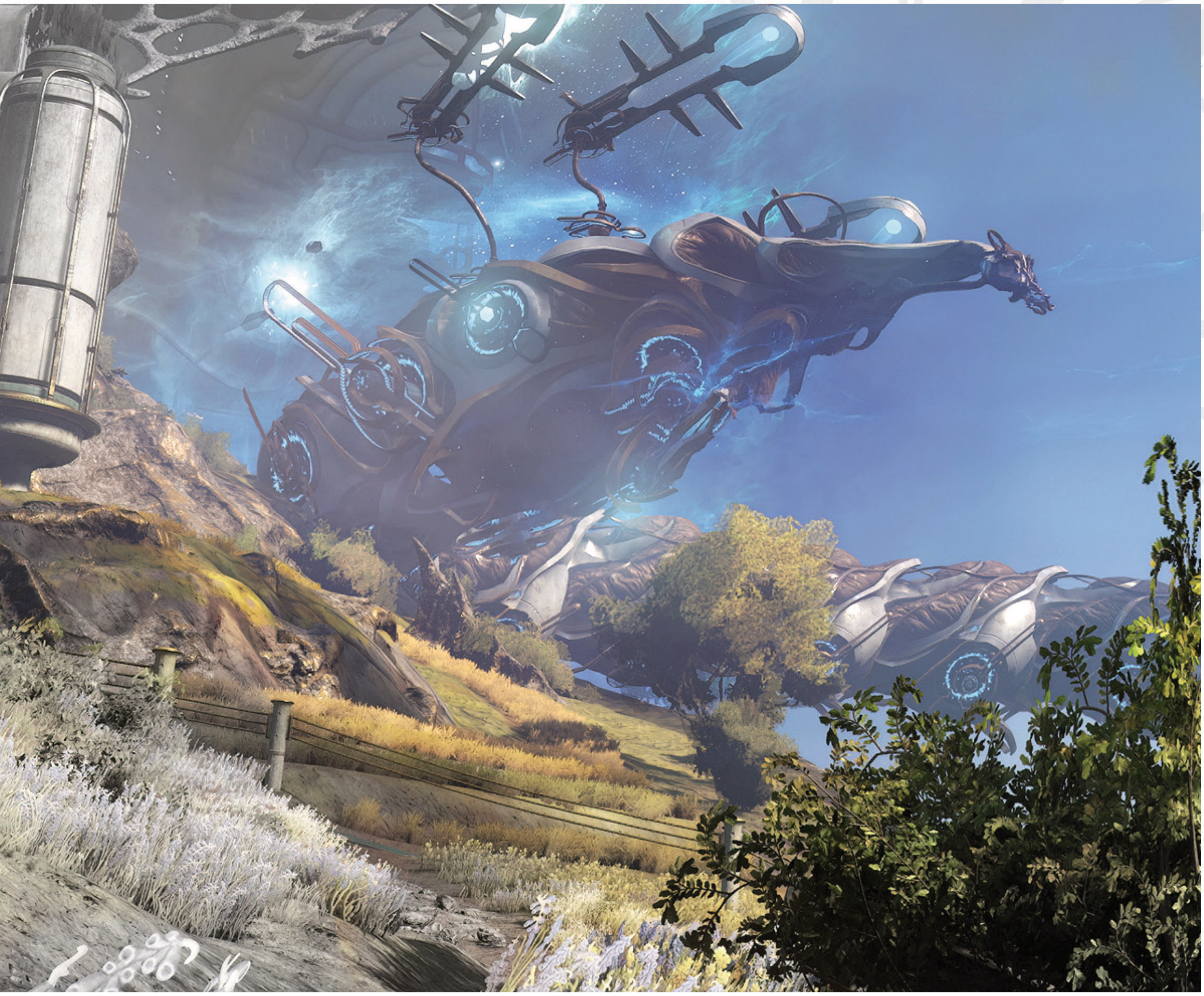
So narratively, how does that work? The luxury of a game like *Warframe*, with so many tools in its narrative box, is that you can play around with continuity. Due to the titular paradox, this quest can act as both a continuation of the story existing players already know, and also as the start for new players. "Of course you can start at the beginning or end of a paradox." It follows the Drifter, the mysterious character introduced in *Warframe*'s huge, late-game story quest The New War. New players can choose to come at *Warframe*'s overarching story from a different direction, one that lets them enjoy what's new rather than having to work through years of existing quests to get up to speed. "It's kind of like our *Fortnite* no-build mode," Ford explains. "It's like, you know *Fortnite* but you don't want to build houses? Sure! It's like, you know *Warframe* but you don't want to have to invest 80 hours to get to the latest update. We're gonna rip it all out and say, with truth to the theme of the story, you can start at the Paradox."

IT'S YOUR GOAL AS THE DRIFTER TO FIGHT BACK AGAINST THRAX

A good thing too, because *The Duviri Paradox* promises to be the game's most ambitious update so far, by quite a margin.

In *Duviri*, the Drifter is a wanderer who has been trapped in a dimension ruled over by King Dominus Thrax, a tyrannical overlord whose very emotions alter the reality of his realm. Trapped in a day that never ends, it's your goal as the Drifter to fight back against Thrax and his forces. The demo I was shown took place post-quest, giving us a look at what players will be coming back for after the update's main story is wrapped up. Thrax's realm is a vast open world where the colour has been sapped out, waiting for the player to restore it. Rather than rolling hills or plains, *Duviri* is a landscape of fractured islands, with huge statues and massive flying worms for wildlife. Eagle-eyed

BELOW: The Lotus will be there in spirit to lend a literal helping hand.



ABOVE: The impressive scope of *Duviri*'s world isn't just about size but how strange it is.

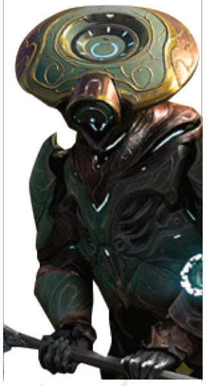
players will even notice pieces of the Zariman woven through the world, as bits of our universe bleed into *Duviri*'s. It's only fitting it be a little strange. Thankfully to get around you'll have a trusty mount called Kaithe, a skeletal horse that can fly like a demonic Pegasus. And don't worry, the horse is customisable.

WARFRAMING DEVICE

Each attempt to thwart Thrax, called a 'day', is a roguelike run, reminiscent of *Hades* or *Slay The Spire*. You'll begin with a modest selection of randomly provided weapons to choose and, across your run, earn upgrades to tackle tougher and tougher obstacles. Everything is melee focused here, and *Duviri* uses the Drifter's lack of power to give *Warframe* a slower pace, more reminiscent of a *Dark Souls* than the usual frantic ninja acrobatics. The Drifter is much more vulnerable than your average warframe and players will need to scour the land for perks, called 'decrees', to bolster their build. To make things more dangerous you'll have to deal with the shifting moods of Thrax, which give different buffs to enemies each day.

Players can chase more traditional help in a set of dungeons known as the Undercroft, a pocket realm where warframes can remain hidden from Thrax who despises them (why, we've yet to learn). Here you can get access to the bio-mechanical suits the game is named after, provided regardless of which ones an existing player may already possess. This means new players can try out warframes and get a feel for the base game without the long investment.

A run in *Duviri*, therefore, isn't the long-term fine-tuning of vanilla *Warframe*, but more the wild abandon of something like *Risk of Rain 2*. "Have as much fun as you can, break the game if you want to." Compared with the incremental improvements you're used to chasing for your warframe, the upgrades of *Duviri* are far more powerful. In the



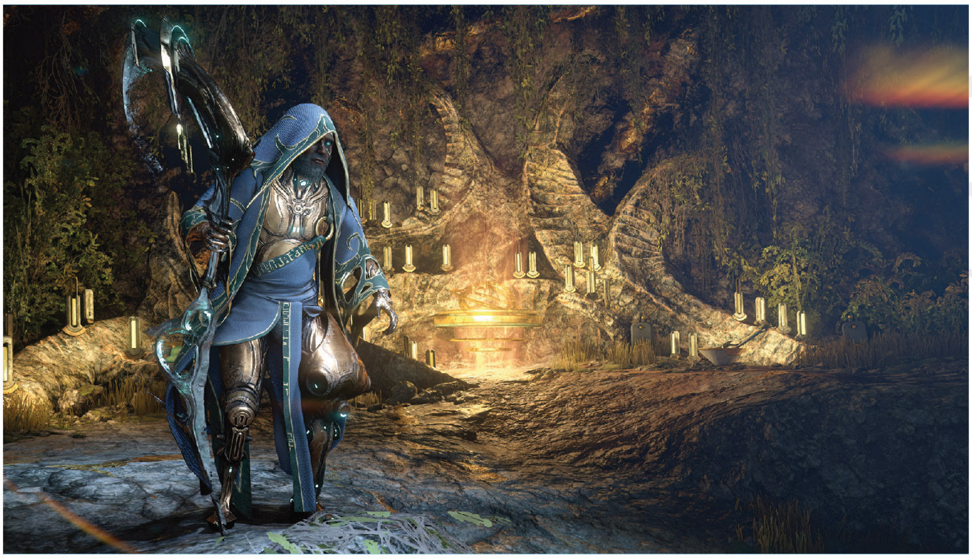
DUVIRI Á LA MODE

Three distinct ways to play Duviri

THE CIRCUIT
For a traditional *Warframe* experience, you can team up with some friends to tackle the dungeons.

THE DUVIRI EXPERIENCE
This is the full package, a vast open world, matchmaking with other random players.

THE LONE STORY
This is for those who just want to get their daily reward and do runs away from everyone else.



ABOVE: Teshin's cave will be your home before each run through *Duviri* and a place to unlock permanent upgrades.

demo I see a decree which grants an ever-stacking damage boost as long as the player can keep moving. It's not hard to see how you could combine perks like these to create an overpowered build. Which is fine, because on the next run you start from scratch. Well, not entirely. While *Duviri* has no town like the game's other spaces, it does have Teshin's cave, the only refuge for the Drifter. It's here you begin each day and can build up some permanent progress, like unlocking weapon slots so you'll have more to choose from when you journey out again.

END AT THE START

Longtime players need not worry, there will still be rewards they can take into regular *Warframe*. Each of the unique melee weapons that the Drifter wields can be unlocked for your warframes too. Though I expect many players, old or new, will be spending a lot of time here. The scope of it is massive and not just in the environments but in the battles too. Towards the end of the demo the Drifter had to battle one of *Duviri*'s giant flying worms. To do so will require players to call upon allies they can unlock and even, if they're powerful enough, take control of the worm for a short spell. If each run ends with an encounter of this scale, I think the thrill of it will be worth chasing.

These runs aren't just about chasing rewards anyway, as each 'day' in *Duviri* is also defined by a procedurally generated story, where you'll be tasked with aiding one of Thrax's citizens. "With *The Duviri Paradox* we're actually pretty inspired by The Princess Bride, we're inspired by all these weird meta-narratives, so a player will hear a familiar voice that gives them the story of, you know, 'the prince of fire', and then you're going to meet this character who has this problem and we're gonna push you in a direction that weaves together different real-time goals but also a meta-narrative, with perhaps a storybook theme of sorts." A small departure from *Warframe*'s outlandish sci-fi tales and space opera, then.

> "WE'RE ACTUALLY PRETTY INSPIRED BY THE PRINCESS BRIDE"

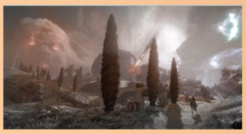
KRULL AND VOID

Far as this update might take us from the familiar, *The Duviri Paradox* is the Drifter's tale, a character who is distinctly human in a strange, post-human world. "The Drifter's experience is very important for us to tell, what they held back and what they were denied, and all of *Duviri* will answer those questions," Ford says. "As things started coming together thematically, knowing this was a story about a person, a character, the Drifter, who is so distinctly human despite the Void and The Man in the Wall and the sci-fi around them. All they really wanted is happiness. That felt like a story I could tell, very honestly."

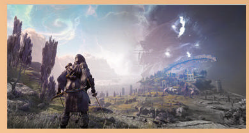
Warframe has been doing its thing for ten years now. Its last expansion, *The New War*, felt like the culmination of a decade of storytelling. *The Duviri Paradox* feels like a departure, a bold step into a whole new realm. A rich roguelike standalone expansion with a strange science fiction story to tell, that might just pave the way forward for games like it to invite new audiences into these long lived games. Proof, if any were needed, that *Warframe* is still alive and kicking in 2023. If what I saw was any indication, that's gonna be kicking a lot of ass.

You can find out for yourself when it releases in April. ■

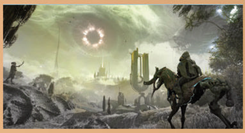
EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER *The five moods of King Thrax*



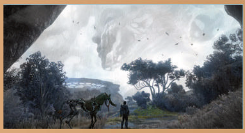
ANGER
A harsher, more hostile landscape where enemies are bolstered with fire.



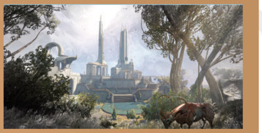
HAPPINESS
Bright and more colourful than usual, this will apparently have more indirect effects on *Duviri*.



ENVY
Dipping the sky in a moody green and giving enemies poison to dish out.



SADNESS
A more melancholy *Duviri*, no small feat in a realm with an absence of colour.



CALM
The mood that will set a baseline for *Duviri* while players do its main quest.

WAY OF THE SPACE NINJA

Looking back on **TEN YEARS OF WARFRAME** with Digital Extremes

By Samantha Greer

W*arframe* is big. Both in its success and in its scale, a vast action game that is as much about space combat, apartment decorating, pet training, fishing, hover surfing, mech fighting and open world exploration, as it is the central ninja combat that defined its debut. It's now ten years old, a feat few of its service game and MMO peers can boast. Like its Tenno, *Warframe* is an underdog that prevailed against the odds.

Digital Extremes itself is almost 30 years old and spent the 2000s doing work-for-hire, creating licensed games for a variety of clients. The Darkness, Star Trek, Dungeons & Dragons... the studio survived by taking whatever work it could. But there was always one dream project, a little sci-fi game the team hoped to one day get off the ground. I asked where the idea came from. "Like every game dev in [2004] they played *Resident Evil 4* and they wanted to make their own version of it," says Steve Sinclair, former creative director on *Warframe*, before he and fellow director Geoff Crookes both burst into laughter. Every answer they give is with a smile and you get the sense they're two guys who never take themselves too seriously. But there is some truth to their joke. "Everyone rediscovered third-person," Sinclair explains, pointing to *Resident Evil 4*'s success and games like *Gears of War*, following the era of first-person dominance, making their project seem more viable. "[*Warframe*] has its roots in what we call the sci-fi version of *Dark Sector*."

DESPITE THE EFFORT, PUBLISHERS WEREN'T INTERESTED

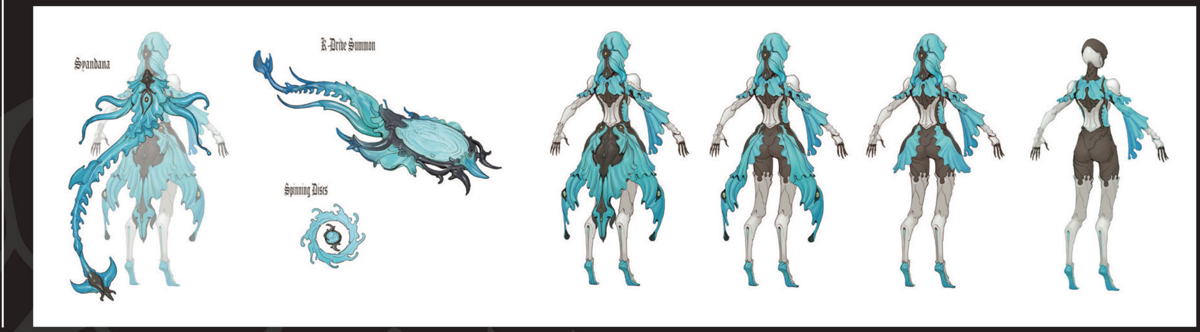
It was this version they pitched to numerous publishers in what is now dubbed the 'rejection tour'. "I was on the road pitching for a year, all over the world with a little cube PC that would always get scrubbed by the bomb squads." Despite the effort, publishers weren't interested. "Sci-fi was dead," they were told. "So like a really confident artist... I completely compromised our vision for it [laughs]."

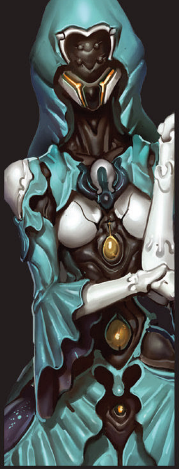
GLAIVE NEWS

Dark Sector was transformed into a modern-set story. Biomechanical suits became a mysterious 'technocyte' virus, and the player character's space ninja became a CIA agent. "I remember Steve had to sit me down," Crookes recounts. "You were so sincere, like, 'Geoff I think we need to make a game with a helicopter.'" *Dark Sector* released in 2008 to decent reviews.

It's clear though that the time following this was difficult for the company, as a seismic shift swept the industry around 2010. "The bottom fell out of all the [mid-sized] developers," CEO Sheldon Carter says of the time, as publishers shifted focus to huge, triple-A projects. "I'm sure everyone you've talked to has told you the same story with this, that we were really in trouble and this was our last shot."

Everyone did tell the same story. They'd had to lay off about a third of their staff. There was time and budget for one last project. If it failed, Digital Extremes was done. They decided that, if this was it, they were going to try make the one game they had always wanted to. So, in 2012, production on *Warframe* began.



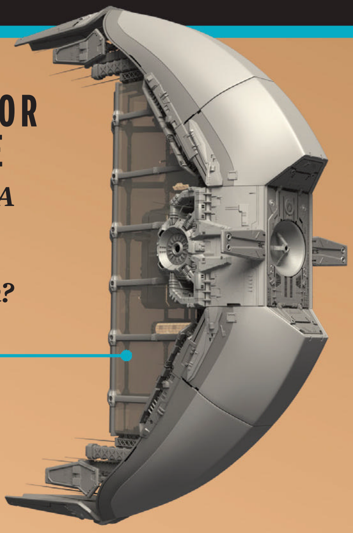


ABOVE: New warframes only get stranger and more interesting.

BOTTOM LEFT: The Yareli design came from community artist Matias Tapia and their 'Magical Girl' warframe series.

THE 2005 DARK SECTOR PROTOTYPE

How much DNA survived from Warframe's earliest version?



1 An early version of a ship that would become legendary in *Warframe* lore as the Zariman Ten Zero, a vessel that only recently appeared in the game.

2 The hero's suit easily resembles the Excalibur warframe, which is used throughout promotional materials.

3 Grineer troopers had a more generic design back in 2005, but the foundation for them is clearly there in older models.

4 Even all those years ago the warframe method of extraction, strapping in to the exterior of their shuttle, was in place.

It couldn't have been a bigger gamble. And they wanted to make it free-to-play. This was ten years ago, long before other big titles had planted their flag there. "I remember when we launched as a PS4 title, that Sony had these internal conferences," Sinclair recalls. "There was a round table on free-to-play and there were two people in the audience. Seven hundred chairs, empty. There's five devs... ***Orcs Must Die*****, me... some other hopeful people and just two people in the audience. Nobody was into it."**

Not only was free-to-play a difficult pitch to gamers at a time when the term was synonymous with mobile phone shovelware, it was a hard sell to Digital Extremes' own team. Sinclair tells me that even their own staff were "leery" of what free-to-play meant. Still unable to secure a publisher, it was decided that Digital Extremes would publish *Warframe* itself. A decision that, quite literally, paid off, according to Sinclair: "Whatever money we made went back into the game and back into the studio. Instead of that cycle you're in with a publisher where you get all these advances and you hope the game makes the money back but you don't know for six months if that's the case. You go through these boom and bust cycles."

CORPUS POCUS

Sinclair fondly remembers when they had their first day of profit. "I'm going to slaughter the exact figure but I believe it was one thousand, five hundred and forty-eight bucks. I ran into the programmers' stand-up meeting and I said, 'We made money!'... they all turned and looked at me, in disbelief." *Warframe*, released as a closed then open beta, came with benefits. "Us making it real and putting it out there, [got us] immediate feedback from players," Crookes explains, where previously the only feedback they were getting was from publishers, whose main interest was trying to get the studio to do more for less. "Immediate feedback from players, positive feedback but also ideas on what they would like... we just had this boom of investment from the development team, to get in there and build this game around the player-base."

WARFRAME TIMELINE

1993
Digital Extremes is founded by James Schmalz.

2000
Dark Sector is first announced.

It wasn't all smooth sailing. Sinclair recounts an especially disastrous moment for the game... on Christmas day. "People were losing XP. End of a mission, they weren't getting the right experience points... we're into the afternoon. Instead of having eggnog, I'm trying to figure this out. So I say, I'm going to build myself a test environment. I'll clear all the accounts, start myself a new account and I'll see what my experience points [are], log the data. Well, I was still connected to the production server when I cleared all the accounts. So Christmas day... I erased everyone's *Warframe* accounts." Sinclair and Crookes can find the humour in moments like that. "I called Glen, who's our tech director, and I said, 'Glen, I just deleted the entire database,' and he just started laughing. You know, you can't be mad, right? You just have to laugh." Thankfully their backups worked averting the crisis.

ABOVE: Heart of Deimos really mechs my day.

Nurturing a community is tricky, especially in unproven waters. Though it never stops being a challenge according to former community director Rebecca Ford. "Every emotion on the spectrum has made up some part of the community journey," she says. "I have just tried over all of these years to understand what people like about *Warframe* and do more of that. Then when we surprise them, let them know we're sometimes going to try different things. And the faster we fail, the easier we can move on."

DOJO MOJO

Part of building a healthy community has no doubt been its free-to-play model. Almost everything in the game can be earned through play, without spending a penny.

Given that model and its success, I asked Carter what the key to making good free-to-play is. "It's still games like we've always made, at least for my career. You have to start first with the fun and the spirit of the game. What's your narrative hook? What's your gameplay hook? You can always keep monetisation in mind but it has to be second." For Carter, their games have to be worth playing forever. "We want it to be something you're gonna be proud of, to talk to your friends about it. Come to Tennocon and chat with other people who are into it."

TENNOCON *Meeting the fans*

2016
Steve Sinclair at the very first Tennocon, three years after the game's launch. It was held in the home of Digital Extremes: London, Ontario, Canada.

2017
Fans are treated each year to a whole variety of novelties like this impressive real-life recreation of the in-game *Warframe* foundry.

TENNO CON 2018

2018
"Just being in the online space for so long, I think there is a *Warframe* bubble," Ford says of its much friendlier online player base.

2019
The final Tennocon before the Covid pandemic struck, with a massive turnout. *Warframe* is a game with a huge, dedicated community.

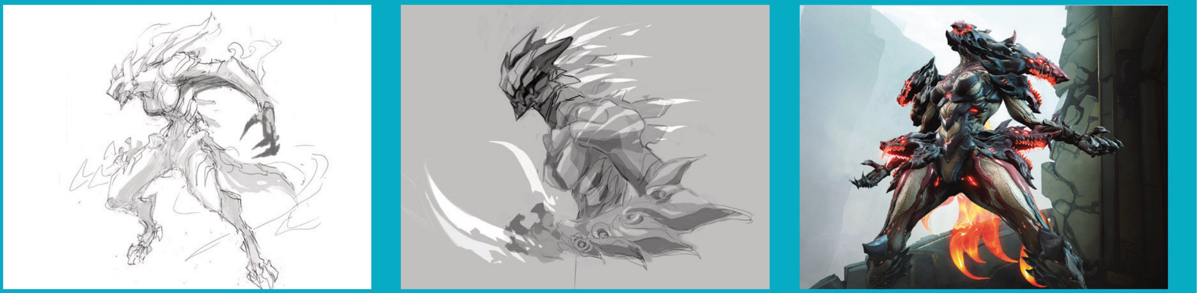
2020-2022
During the pandemic Digital Extremes held Tennocon within the game, with a live event and stream to promote *The Duviri Paradox.*

2023
This year will be the first in-person Tennocon in three years. "It just pumps everyone up, gets us all ready to go," Carter says with glee.

2005
A trailer for a prototype sci-fi *Dark Sector* is revealed.

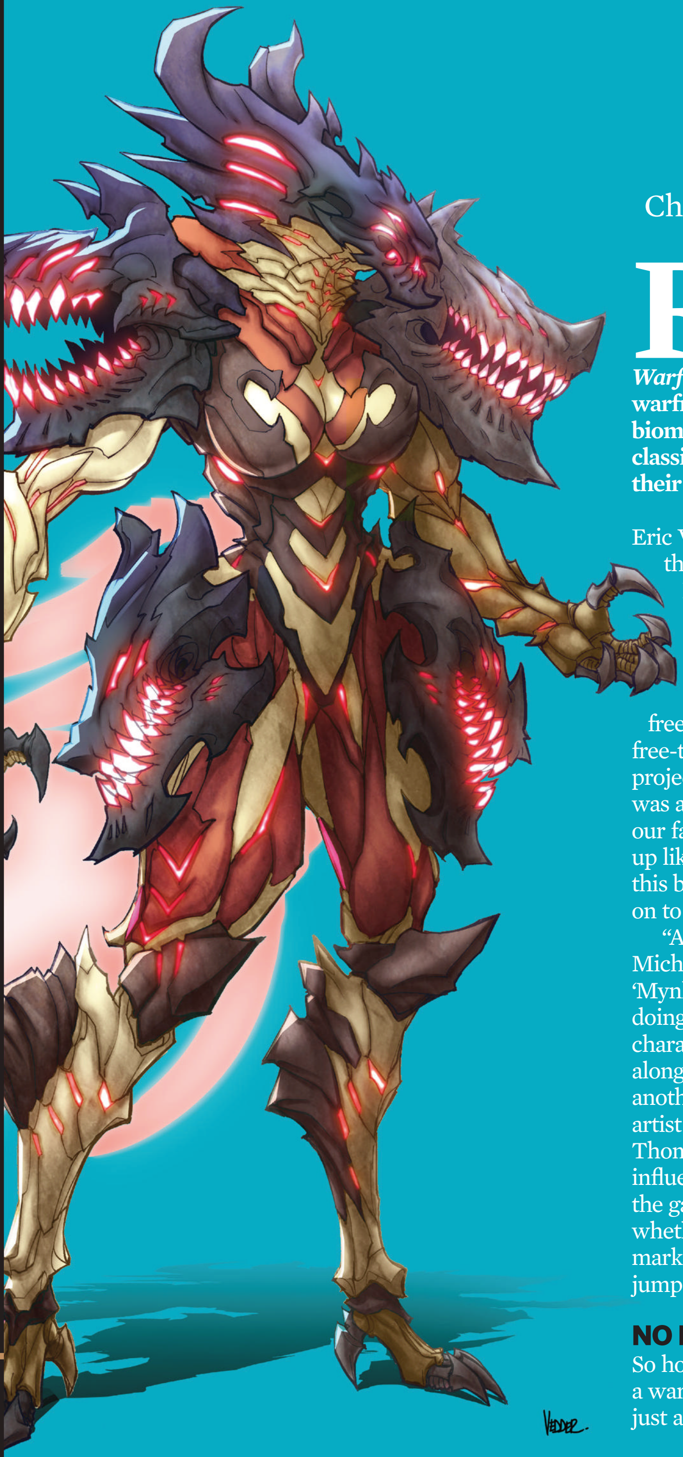
2008
Dark Sector is released, with a changed, modern setting.

2012
Production on *Warframe* begins.



RIGHT: Early exploratory stages are more playful and noticeably looser.

BELOW: Constraints have to be considered, such as player customisation and attachments.



RIGHT WARFRAME OF MIND

Chatting design with lead concept artist **ERIC VEDDER**

Right away, back in 2013 when the game first came out, the thing that stood out to me about *Warframe* were the titular warframes themselves. Strange, biomechanical bodies that evoked classic ninja archetypes but also their own hybrid of shapes.

Eric Vedder is lead concept artist on the game. He started at Digital Extremes 12 years ago, working on games such as *Star Trek* and *The Darkness II*. "A small group broke off and started working on *Warframe*. This free-to-play and I was like, 'What's free-to-play?' [laughs]." After other projects were wrapped up, *Warframe* was all that was left. "It worked in our favour because everyone ended up liking this game they were doing, this beta." Vedder was first brought on to work on props for the game.

"At the time Michael Brennan, 'Mynki', was doing most of the character work along with another concept artist Keith Thompson. Very influential." As the game became bigger, though, whether it was character designs or marketing materials, artists would jump on whatever was needed.

THE ARTISTS KEEP TRYING TO PUSH WHAT THE GAME AND ITS HEROES CAN BE

NO LONE WOLF

So how does the process of designing a warframe begin? "Sometimes it's just a simple conversation, a banter back and forth over a drink or a lunch break *or* something more official, that's a paragraph or two."

Not all warframe ideas come from the studio, however. "We get influenced by a lot of things, mostly by our community. We're really close to our community."

From there, nailing a design becomes about collaboration. "Each of the stages, they change," Vedder explains, describing the concept stage where you have fun before it gets refined with the team into something tangible. "It'll get sent over to a modeller then they might block it in and then it'll come back to concept, then we'll start sketching in over the loose block so we can spin it in 3D and go, 'Oh, this idea worked as a 2D drawing but as I turn it around, this looks shitty' [laughs]."

The artists keep trying to push what the game and its heroes can be. "*Warframe* is always trying to do something a little different, a little weird." Something that can be seen in its latest warframe, the 51st, Voruna, a werewolf-themed beast which is Vedder's favourite design to date. "More so because I got to work with my art hero Joe Madureira." A collaboration that took place at every stage. "I was really involved from the initial conversations to the initial sketches to the refined sketches to the production art, the colour, the final art for it all, everything."

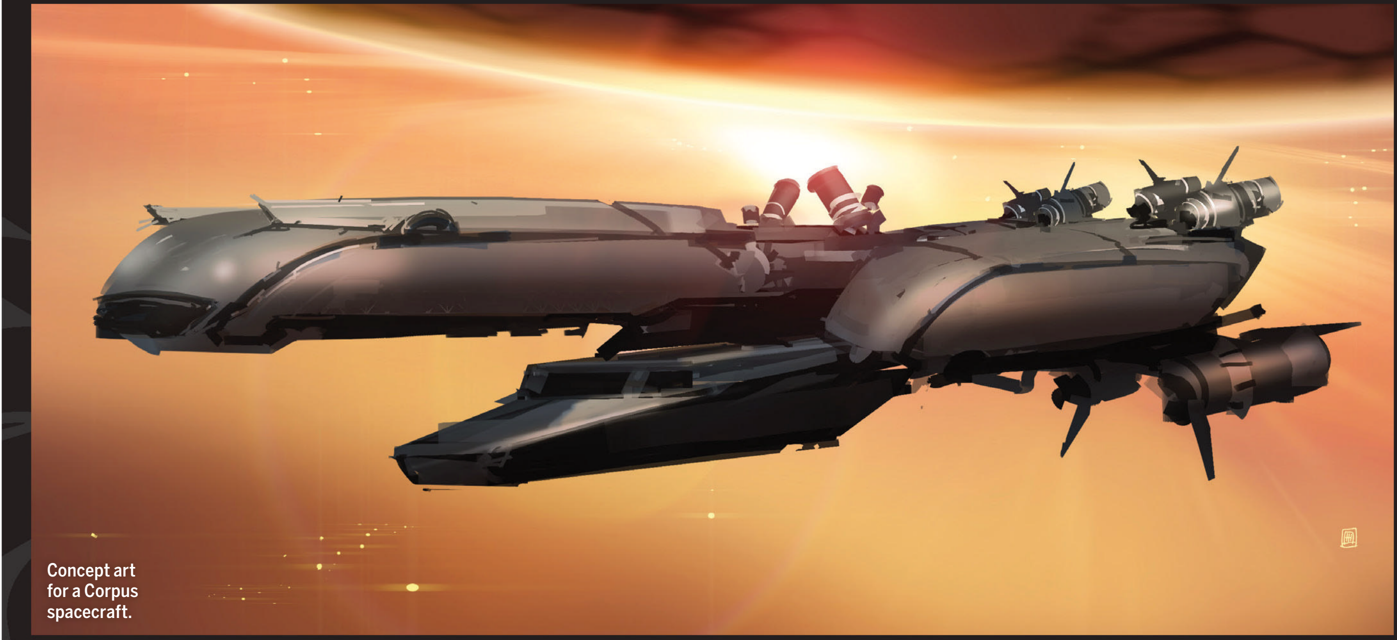
Over the years one of the most remarkable things about *Warframe*, as someone who has played it from the early days in 2013 to the present, is how a really compelling narrative slowly emerged from its shooting and looting. Talk to most fans and they will cite story moments in quests like The War Within as the highlights of the entire game. And every fan remembers The Second Dream twist, which reframes the whole game's narrative.

LOST IN SPACE

In hindsight it looks carefully planned, but depending on who you ask a lot of it emerged over time. “My recollection and this is my recollection only...” Ford begins telling me, amused at what are sure to be discrepancies between people's accounts. “Is that Operators and stuff weren't a thing early on in *Warframe*.” She recalls that the earliest concepts of the Operators didn't come about until about two years after the game's launch, laying the groundwork for the game's first big audacious twist in The Second Dream.

“It wasn't like Lost, we weren't making it up as we going along... I'm kidding, it was that,” Sinclair jests. Though he says they certainly did have some ideas even early on for the game's themes like the duality of the Tenno as well as The Second Dream twist. Crookes agrees. “There was a foundation there that [Steve and I] would talk about. It's funny, some players would pick up on these little seeds we were planting.” Yet The Second Dream was a contentious idea in the studio, Sinclair recalls that some in the studio found the twist “scandalous”. “We were scared to do it,” Crookes admits. “We were so excited to do it but we were nervous cause we're like, ‘Is this gonna turn off a majority of the players? Is this even why they play this game?’”

To play *Warframe* now, you can arrive at a quest like The Second Dream sooner. An acknowledgement that it really became what a lot of players were invested in. “It even had this unexpected consequence or benefit of we saw a lot of players come back,” Crookes says. “We saw a lot of accounts get reactivated when The Second Dream started getting the word out. That motivated us, excited us and got us to invest in that kind of worldbuilding.”



Concept art for a Corpus spacecraft.

2013
Warframe enters closed beta.

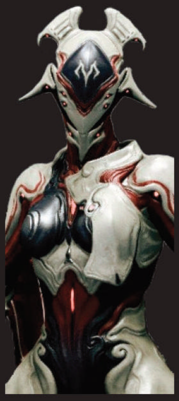
2014
Warframe is released.

2015
The Second Dream comes out.

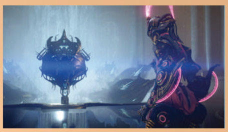
ABOVE: Angels of the Zariman was the first big update released under Rebecca Ford as creative director.

“And as [The Second Dream] was the first time, between Steve and Geoff and the leadership team, they realised that we needed to have good narrative,” Ford says, of how it redefined the game. “Like, action gameplay is great, but it’s not very emotional, and all of them, as long as I’ve known them, have cared so much about the art of storytelling. They realised very early on that we had an opportunity to tell a story.”

For an action-driven service game like *Warframe*, a balance does have to be struck, as Sinclair explains. “There’s always this argument as a game designer, the purity versus the story versus the world. *Warframe* has definitely been experimental for us in toying with those things, getting burned and then having some success as well.” Despite those wins, nobody is more critical of their work than the developers. Sinclair feels like The New War had its issues. “Something like The New War, I possibly took it too far, where that was just so much work. So much animation. Ideally, I could be a bit lighter touch on the size of those scripts. It’s been a really interesting learning exercise. The quality of the writing, obviously we grew a writing staff, the quality of the VO, the acting, just watching those rise through the life of the project.”



SPOILER SECTOR *Warframe’s greatest twists*



THE SECOND DREAM

Undeniably the point where most players sit up and pay attention is when it’s revealed the warframes are simply remote-controlled bodies. The moment you meet your Operator is memorable.

THE WAR WITHIN

The next big step on the journey was learning the full extent of your powers, culminating in the moment when the Operator projects their mind across the solar system to help rescue a mate.

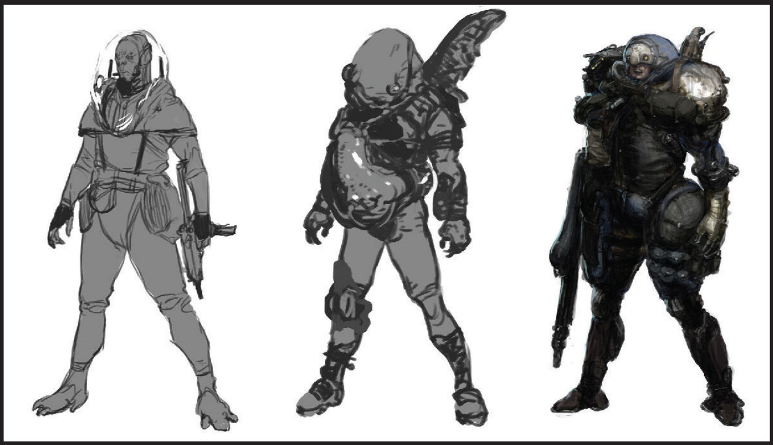
THE NEW WAR

This questline had many big reveals, but none as mindbending as finding out the mysterious Drifter is really your Operator... and then finding out they’re you from another timeline.

2016
The first Tennocon is held.

2016
The War Within releases, advancing the story.

2017
Plains of Eidolon, *Warframe*’s first open world, is released.



ABOVE: Many designs come through the community, whose artists are paid from sales of the item.

RIGHT: Concept art gets closer to the Grineer we know.

Rebecca Ford, in many ways, has been closer to the story than most, having lent her own voice to the Lotus, the player character's mentor, who guides them throughout the entire game. Joining the company from a local MIT programme as an intern, how'd she end up in the role? "It's because we had no money," she admits frankly. "And I was like one of four women on the team at the time." She was willing to give it a try, but found there were certain things she couldn't do in place of a professional voice actor. "I remember we had to watch David Lynch's Dune and they were like, 'Can you do a British accent? Can you be like the empress at the beginning of Dune?' I was like, 'No? I can be a Canadian?'"

But for Ford, it's not a simple relationship she has with that character. "I was 21 when I recorded my first [lines] for Lotus. I was a young lady. Now I'm ten-plus years older... I love her, like Lotus is in *Smash*, right? She's a spirit in *Super Smash*. I feel like in many ways she's everything I'm not. I love her as a character, I just wish I could do better for her."

The future of *Warframe*'s story is a bright one but also one full of mystery. There are plenty of hints about what's coming and yet it feels like the game could go anywhere. How do you steer a project like that? "The one thing I have learned that's been the most precious for me to always look in on," Ford says. "Is working on a creative team of people that are experts in their field, [is] a comforting truth when you can tell a story together and for me, it's about what story we're telling next and I am very excited to get the Duviri chapter out into the world then see where it goes from there."

VOID OF ANSWERS

Warframe's enduring mystery – who is the Man in the Wall?

You'd think this enigmatic, shape shifting entity from another dimension finally showing up in person with The New War would give us some answers, but they remain as elusive as ever. Based on their dialogue in The War Within and the scenes from the past aboard the Zeriman Ten Zero we see, they seem to be responsible for gifting the powers of the Void (which make Tenno all that they are) to the Operator, but what exactly they wanted in return remains unknown. Yet it certainly seems like a deal with the devil.

2018
Fortuna and Orb Vallis open world are added.

2019
Rising Tide brings ship combat to *Warframe*.

2020
The Heart of Deimos and Cambion Drift are added.

NOT SO SILENT ASSASSIN

Creating the soundscape for Warframe with **KEITH POWER** and **GEORGE SPANOS**

For many fans, *Warframe*'s greatest moments are tied up in its music and its sounds. Each expansion solidifies what a sonically unique world they've created. Two people responsible for a forging that identity are composer Keith Power and audio director George Spanos. Though they each worked at Digital Extremes many years before *Warframe*, working together on *Dark Sector*, they both go way back. "To our earlier lives doing music and audio for advertising," Power says. Spanos reckons they started working together in 2000.

ABOVE: It's a soundtrack worth appreciating through some decent headphones.

"It's more of a collaborative thing, even at the start, of 'What do you think Keith? What do you think this could be?'" Spanos explains. How did they find those initial, iconic sounds? "You had to be able to iterate quickly," Spanos says, describing the nature of service games when *Warframe* began. "Early on, listening to player feedback. Taking that in and thinking to ourselves, 'OK, how does that fit into the landscape we want to create?'" *Warframe* began with just two factions but they are still both a huge parts of the game's character, in no small part thanks to their sound design. "Grineer are these mechanical, old world, oily type of sounding guys where as Corpus are more high tech," Spanos puts it simply. "We recorded a lot of sounds in the studio, organic sounds, metal, clothing sounds, all that kind of stuff for the Grineer. And Corpus, a lot of it is made in the computer. Digital, processed sounds. That goes for the voices too."

WAR DRUMS

For Power, when he started on *Warframe*, Spanos and the team had already implemented some basics for him to build upon. "There was a handful of pieces that were already in there. Some Taiko drumming, which was amazing. That's probably the thing people think of when they think of *Warframe*." Collaboration is essential but so too is change. "In the early days it was setting up a bunch of rules for ourselves then we've, quite literally, been breaking them with every quest."

COLLABORATION IS ESSENTIAL BUT SO TOO IS CHANGE

Those musical moments in the quests were something I was keen to chat about, since they helped elevate iconic scenes of The Second Dream or The War Within. "When Power wrote This Is What You Are, we realised we had something special on our hands. It kind of became the anthem of the Tenno." The tune is a motif deployed with razor precision after it's introduced, signalling the important steps in the Tenno's journey. "I basically just try to make George cry," Power says. "It's a good indication it's going to resonate with players as well."

Perhaps the most iconic piece of music in and outside of the game is We All Lift Together, a workers song chanted by the labourers of Fortuna on Venus. "I've always wanted a hit song," Power says with a laugh. To Spanos, it was a way to tell their story in a way that was both efficient and impactful. "When players hear this, they can relate to it'"

So what lies ahead for *Warframe*? Exactly a year before the time we spoke, Ford was made creative director. Something that felt like a natural fit to nearly everyone but herself. "I didn't ask, I didn't apply, we were looking internally at a leadership level," she explains. "I hadn't even considered myself at all. Truly, truly, did not think I had it."

> "WITH SOULFRAME I WANT IT TO FEEL PUNK ROCK A BIT, YOU KNOW?"

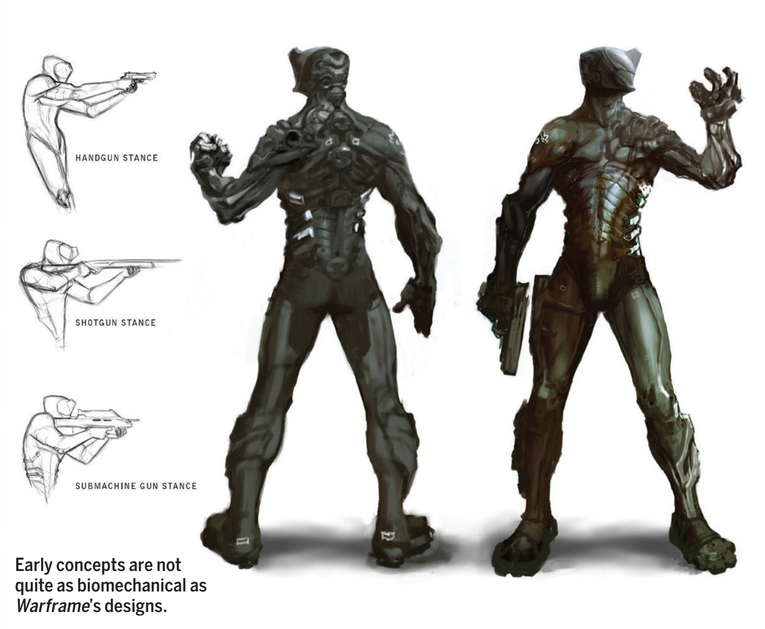
Sinclair, Crookes and Carter thought Ford was the obvious choice and essential in keeping Digital Extremes healthy. "If my old ass is stuck in whatever position, other people don't get a chance to grow and try out things," Sinclair says.

Starting as one of a tiny handful of women at the studio, Ford is now proud of how things have improved. "We've hired about 60-plus women, which is amazing for me to see."

A NEW QUEST

Taking over a "ten year old pseudo-MMO that was basically crowdfunded from the ground up" and taking it into a bold new future is something both exciting and terrifying for Ford. "I want to do a good job but I don't know if I know how. So I just need to trust myself, trust my team and trust the community. We'll figure it out together. They'll tell me if I'm wrong. I'm not surrounded by people who are like, 'OK boss, let's do that idea.'"

And while *Warframe* is now in exciting new hands, its old creative heads are embarking on a new journey with the recently announced *Soulframe*. "I'm an old Star Trek guy, the mirror universe, the Terran Empire. So [*Soulframe*] isn't the opposite of *Warframe* but some things are inverted," Sinclair says. "*Warframe* is crazy fast, high agility, *Soulframe* is a bit slower, more casual. *Warframe* is about shooting, *Soulframe* is about melee more. But there's a lot of shared DNA. With *Soulframe* I want it to feel punk rock a bit, you know? I wanna do something with only two people in the audience initially."



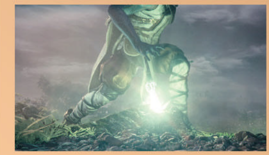
Early concepts are not quite as biomechanical as *Warframe*'s designs.

LOOK INTO YOUR SOULFRAME

What to expect from the next game

DISTINCT VISUALS
Expect it to retain *Warframe*'s unique aesthetic sensibilities.

SLOWER PACE
Based on developer comments, *Souls*-like combat.



NATURE NURTURE
Your character will generate some kind of bond with the natural world .

WEIRDNESS
No matter what it looks like now, expect *Soulframe* to go places you'll never see coming.

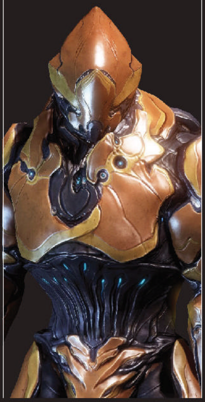
2021
Call of the Tempestarii adds substantial railjack quest.

2021
After years of teasers, The New War released.

2022
Rebecca Ford announced as *Warframe*'s creative director.

ABOVE: What is a space opera without melodramatic villains?

It’s a tall order, with *Warframe*’s success shaping the industry in a big way. They struggled to convince their own team with *Warframe*, now they have people knocking on their door to experience working on a service game. “If [Sinclair] was doing that same presentation this year at an E3, there’d be more than two people in the crowd,” Crookes states. “It’s a much different development time to do this than it was when we did *Warframe*. I think *Warframe* shipped with eight warframes? And two small art sets? We’re going to be required to ship more when we launch *Soulframe*.”



TENNO YEARS OLDER

For a game and a developer journey as storied as *Warframe*, looking back now, what were the highlights for the team?

There are a couple for Carter, but a big one was the unveiling of Plains of Eidolon at Tennocon, *Warframe*’s first open world. “In front of that crowd, hearing them erupt with their joy. I’m just a game developer, so now I get why Madonna is going back on world tour again to stand in front of people.” The surprise is a key part, he tells me. “It was something they all wanted, that they had no idea they were going to get.”

“I have this very strong memory from when The Second Dream came out,” Sinclair begins, telling me about a moment he won’t forget. “We were getting reactions and watching people play it and this one fan just broke down and bawled at the end. This was playing in our board room to our admin, James who started the company, who is very aloof, not very emotionally available, and the tears were rolling silently down his cheeks as he’s watching this player just losing their mind and gush with love about what an experience it had been.”

Ford’s is the moment she got offered the creative director role, a huge achievement for someone who started at the company as an intern and now gets to steer the ship. “I feel like never again in my lifetime will I get an opportunity to tell someone our next creative choice and see it all come together, so perfectly, that I just want to make the most of it. I’m not gonna stare too close at the fear part of me, that knows how difficult it is to make games.” As always with Ford, it’s onwards and upwards. “I think it’s gonna be our best year yet.” ■

2022
Angels of the Zariman released as first project under Ford.

2022
Soulframe announced as the next project for Geoff Crookes.

2023
The Duviri Paradox is due to be released in April.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Dead or alive

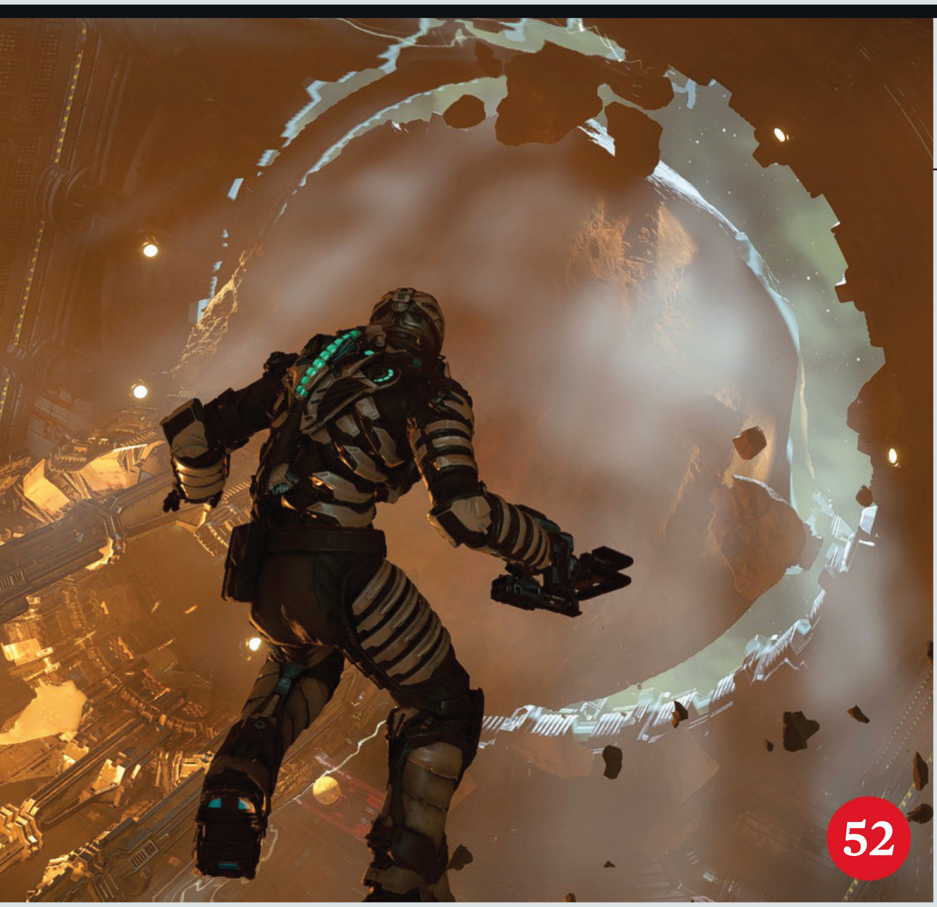
This month we see the return of two much-loved gaming classics from the past. *Persona 3 Portable* originally released back in 2006, while *Dead Space* hit store shelves in 2008, two dates now separated from the present by more than 15 years. Now though, in 2023, these games return remastered and, in terms of *P3P*, playable on PC for the very first time.

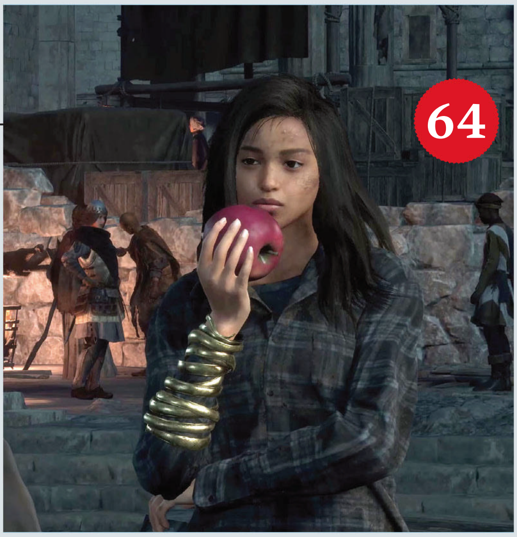
The past is interesting, though, isn't it? How does the old saying go… "the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there". Were these games good then? Yes, sure, but was that greatness localised to that time and place, was it fundamentally indebted to the gaming industry and standards of the mid-to-late 2000s? Read our reviews to see if these games work in the present, or if they should've remained in the past.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES

THE PAST IS INTERESTING, THOUGH, ISN'T IT? HOW DOES THE OLD SAYING GO… "THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY, THEY DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY THERE".





Contents

52 Dead Space
56 **Roller Drama**
58 One Piece Odyssey
62 **Colossal Cave**
64 Forspoken
68 **Persona 3 Portable**
72 Mahokenshi
74 **Power Chord**
76 Aquatico
78 **Pizza Tower**
80 Season: A Letter To The Future

FREE GAMES

82 The Telwynium: Book Two
83 **Hue Flowing**
83 Battle of Windows

This month's brain-eating reviewers...

ANDREA SHEARON

Specialist in
Petting Koromaru

Currently playing
Persona 3 Portable

This month
Stayed up past her bed time playing games in the Dark Hour.

MOLLIE TAYLOR

Specialist in
Waiting for code

Currently playing
Forspoken

This month
Petted a magical unicorn cat, practiced parkour while taking interesting detours.

JEREMY PEEL

Specialist in
Inventory management

Currently playing
Colossal Cave

This month
Walked around a cave, picked up diamonds, dropped them.

SEAN MARTIN

Specialist in
Fighting space horrors

Currently playing
Dead Space

This month
Learnt the importance of air to breathing and, you know, staying alive in deep space.

SCOTT MCCRAE

Specialist in
Balding Italian cooks

Currently playing
Pizza Tower

This month
Waged war on the pizza. Well, pizza in the form of a massive tower, specifically.

BF-37
BF-37
58

DEAD MAN WALKING

The DEAD SPACE remake is a promising portent for the series' future

By Sean Martin

"Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are?" a dying woman sings over the elevator speakers as I climb through the decks of the doomed ship Ishimura. I'm not a big fan of that whole nursery rhyme horror cliché, but it fits for *Dead Space*. This was never a series about exploring the wonders of the universe or of space as a wild frontier where the worst evil we can imagine is corporate greed dominating the stars.

No, this is a game about how space is downright scary; an abyss into which we gaze and see our nightmares reflected right back. It's hard to marvel at the universe with a Necromorph's blades in your gut. Necromorph is a fancy space word for zombie, by the way, and you'll come to know them intimately in *Dead Space*, as they jump-scare you every few minutes for the next ten or so hours. If there's one thing I'm glad this remake didn't change, it's the Necromorph jumping-out-of-vent scream that almost sounds as if they're as surprised as you are. It's good to be back on the Ishimura, even if this is a remake instead of a fourth game.

It's a fact made all the more frustrating by how much this remake feels like a brand-new *Dead Space*. Sure, it's got the same bleak atmosphere, overarching narrative and the same ol' Necromorphs, but it could be the foundation for *Dead Space* moving forward; proof that this survival horror formula is as strong now as it was when the original launched in 2008. And I think a big part of this remake's strength is down to the fact that it builds on what was already there, rather than trying to make something brand-new.

> **This survival horror formula is as strong now as it was in 2008**

MEET YOUR MARKER

Isaac Clarke is your average space engineer, hoping to see his girlfriend Nicole after a long time spent apart. Instead, he finds himself working the worst shift in human history. As you bounce from crisis to crisis trying to keep the dying planet-cracker USG Ishimura on its last legs, you also have to contend with the ship's changed crew, now Necromorphs of all shapes and sizes who very much want to make friends. Your only defence? An array of sci-fi power tools that turn out to be pretty effective at dismembering aliens.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A remake of the 2008 survival horror game *Dead Space*

EXPECT TO PAY
$89.95

DEVELOPER
Motive

PUBLISHER
EA

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5-12400F, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ea.com/games/dead-space

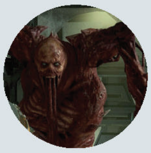
KNOW YOUR NECROMORPHS

From Necro-A to Necro-B

BRUTES
These are hard to kill, especially if you shoot them from the front. Your best bet is to slow them with stasis, then circle around and use the Ripper to slice 'em.

DIVIDERS
Though these Necromorphs are rare and hunt alone, be wary of their grab attacks. Once dead, their bodies 'divide' and all the parts attack at once.

GUARDIANS
You'll likely hear this wall-mounted Necromorph before you see it. Sever the limbs attaching it to the wall before it fires out too many turrets.

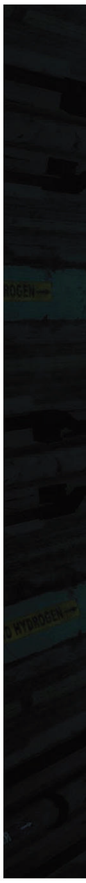


HUNTERS
There isn't much you do against a Hunter except run. These Necromorphs regenerate, so chop off their legs and use stasis to slow them down.

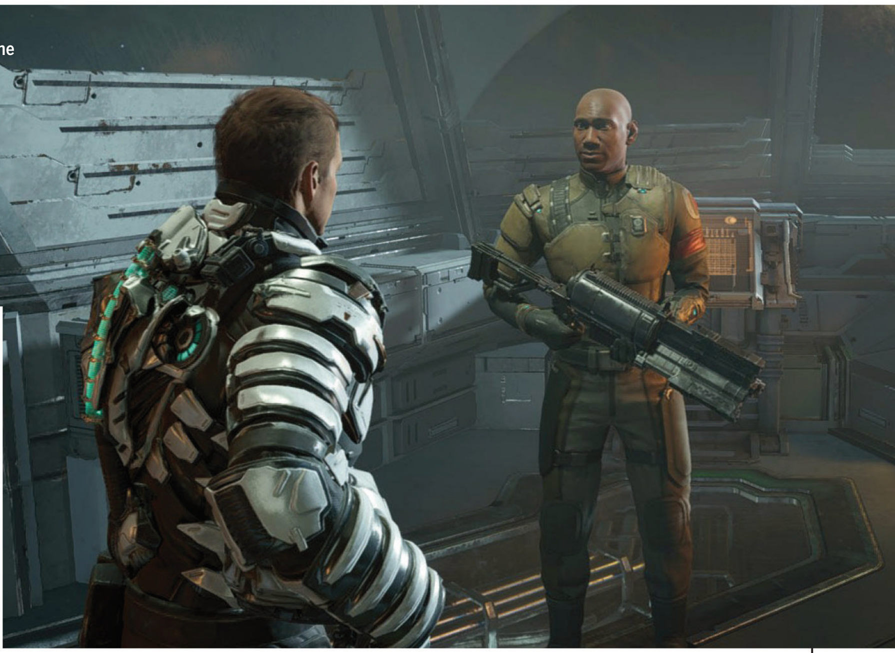
Dead Space manages more in ten hours than most games do in thirty, and that narrative has been further focused in the remake. Isaac actually talks now and this helps make him feel like an active participant in the story. His dialogue does err a little towards action hero at times with lines like, "I'm all out of good ideas, so guess what's left," but you do get more of a sense of him barely keeping his shit together as the crisis continues to escalate.

There are only so many limbs you can slice off, after all, even if the remake's weaponry does feel very good. There was a lot of talk about the new horrendous-sounding Necromorph Peeling system in advance of the remake, but besides being a strong visual indicator of weakened limbs and what to chop, blowing more bits off Necromorphs is definitely a good time. My favourite thing has been blasting them point blank with the Force Gun and watching as an all-but-fleshless skeleton stands up like a chicken carcass put through one of those industrial blow dryers.

Brutalising Necromorphs is an iconic part of *Dead Space*'s cycle of catharsis: you jump scare me, I reverse-engineer you from existence, and this is how we cope with fear. Along with the great guns, there are also new alt-fire and upgrade options for weapons. The weird bullet cyclone for the Pulse Rifle has been swapped for a proximity grenade launcher, and the Line Gun can lay down tripwires. For a Plasma Cutter purist like me, it's nice to be able to place a perimeter of traps and get a bit more use out of the other guns.

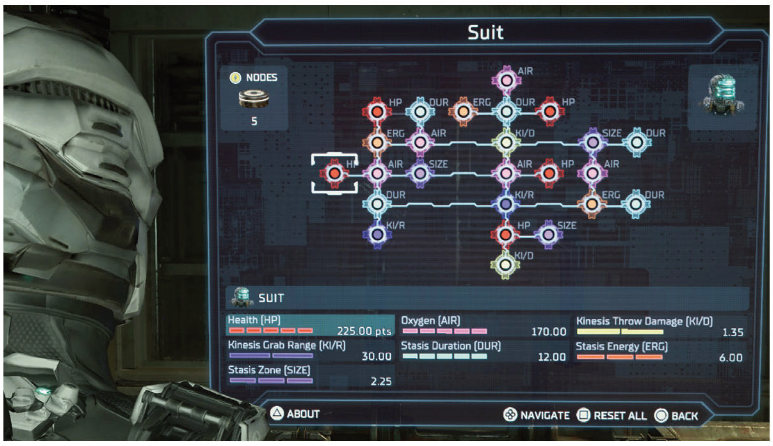


Most of the big ticket boss fights, such as tangling with the Necromorph Hunter in chapter five,



Gunner Wright returns as Isaac's voice from the other games.

FILTRATION TUBE 3

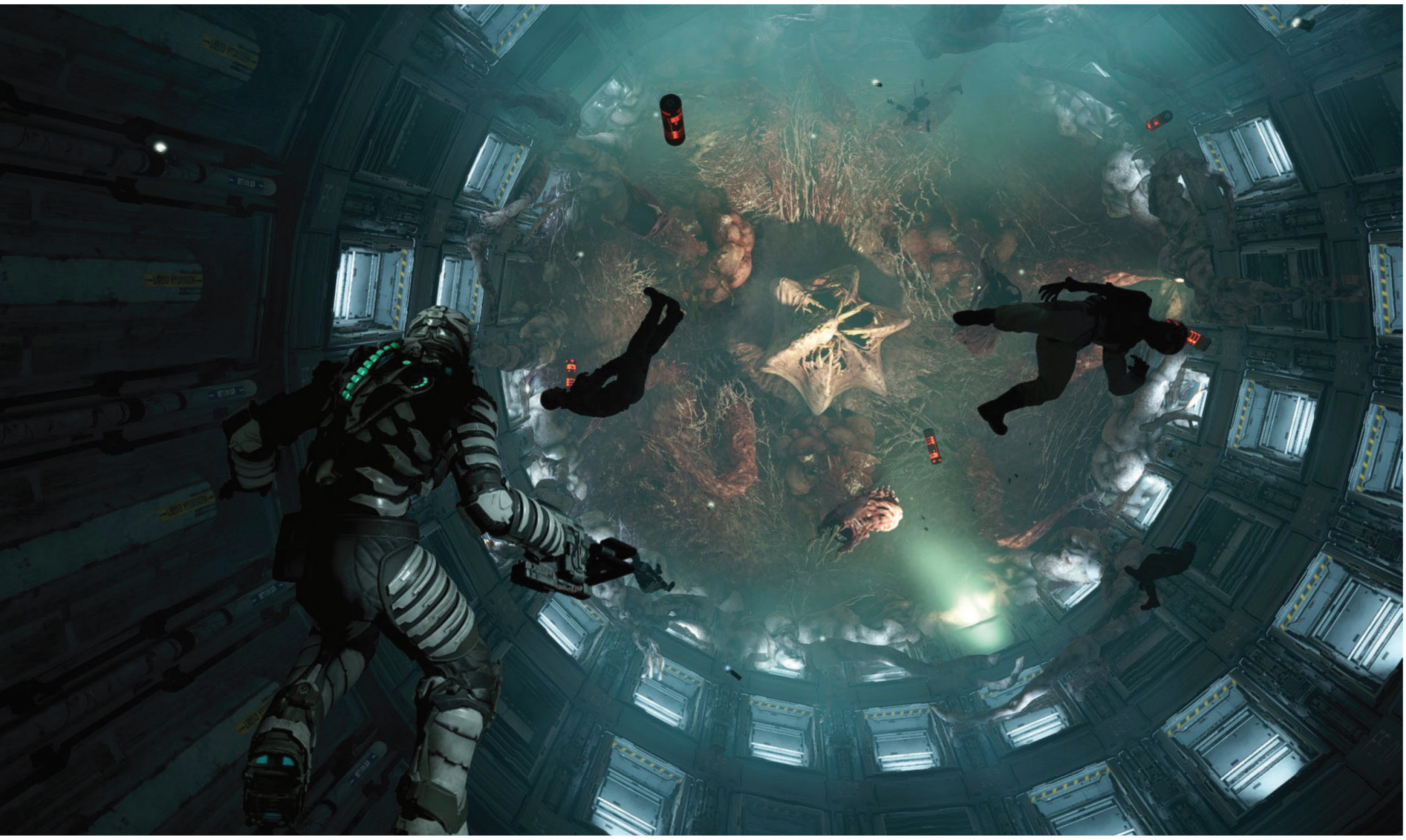


Suit
NODES
5
AIR
HP
DUR
ERG
KI/D
SIZE
KI/R
SUIT
ABOUT
NAVIGATE
RESET ALL
BACK

Health (HP) 225.00 pts
Oxygen (AIR) 170.00
Kinesis Throw Damage (KI/D) 1.35
Kinesis Grab Range (KI/R) 30.00
Stasis Duration (DUR) 12.00
Stasis Energy (ERG) 6.00
Stasis Zone (SIZE) 2.25

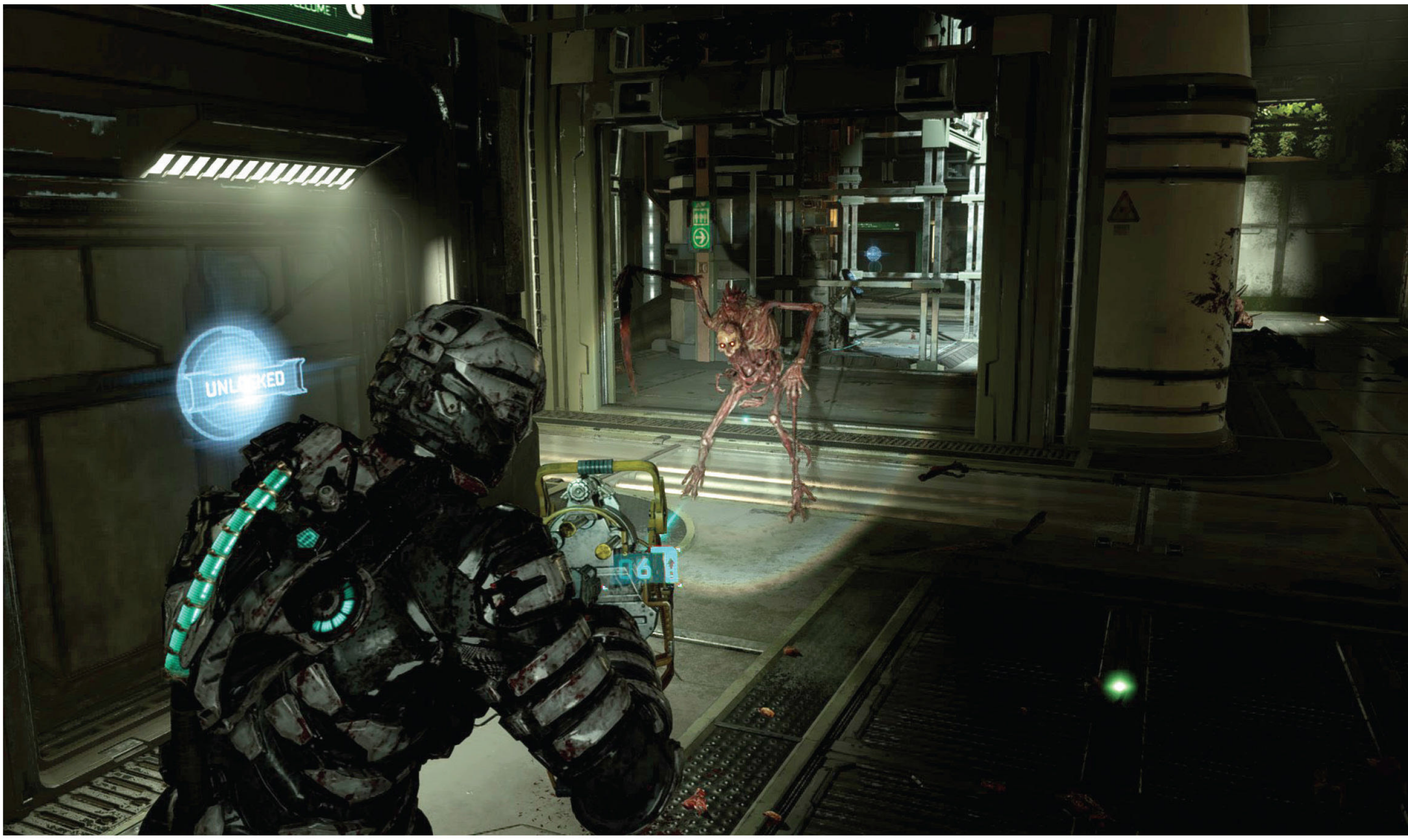
FAR LEFT: Your suit and weapons feature new special abilities.

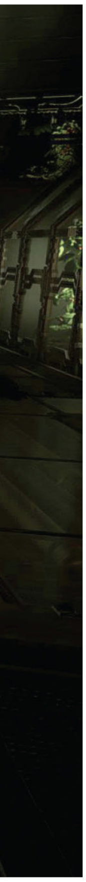
BELOW: Both of the Leviathan boss fights now take place in free-floating zero-G.



FAR RIGHT: *Dead Space* recaptures the same bleak atmosphere as the original.

BELOW: Necromorph Peeling lets you brutalise baddies in all new ways.





play out frame for frame – though they definitely look a hell of a lot better. That said, both of the Leviathan boss fights are infinitely more fun now *Dead Space 2* and *3*'s free floating zero-G has been added. The second boss fight in particular has been entirely redesigned, with you gliding around the hulking mass and manually commandeering ADS cannons to blast away at its weak points.

FIGHT GRAVITY

Dead Space's zero-G isn't just for tackling hulking space monstrosities, though. Another change is the inclusion of new no-gravity puzzles, and there's nothing quite like sitting back and floating as you try to figure out some complex space engineering problem. I found these sequences to be a nice respite from fighting Necromorphs, letting you think about something other than alien amputation for a little while, and they're a strong addition to the remake. Fixing the Comms Array in-particular is a very chill puzzle that lets you glide around in the middle of a big dome, swapping out parts, and repositioning to admire your work. There are even some open zero-G sections akin to the ship graveyard in *Dead Space 3* that you can explore at will.

It's just one of the many changes that work to enhance the original. Circuit breakers are another wonderful example. These power-switchers have been added to older sections as a form of devil's bargain, letting you choose what to turn on and off. You want elevator access? Sure, but it'll cost you either lights or oxygen. It's a pick-your-poison mechanic that lets players select their preferred difficulty modifier and fight through the area. One of my favourite Circuit Breakers in Hydroponics is purely psychological, letting you turn off 'Jungle Ambience' so you can hear the entity living in the vents.

While there used to be few reasons to return to older areas of the Ishimura, the remake adds locked doors and containers requiring security clearance to open, to motivate you to explore fully for extra items. Since you gain clearance as you progress through the story, you have to remember the location of these secret stashes, Metroidvania-style, and return once you've got the upgrades. Coupled with the new random encounters and visual and audio cues, it goes a long way toward making previous areas feel a bit more occupied. Even a little expedition to open a locked room can be a dangerous proposition.

> **It's amazing so much effort has gone into re-developing the original**

REDEVELOPMENT

This *Dead Space* remake could also be termed a narrative one, since while it doesn't change the major story beats or plot of the original it does cast them in a completely new light via sidequests, holographics logs, new characters and through Isaac now being able to speak. People like Elizabeth Cross, who you never previously interacted with directly, are now fully fledged characters who have their own individual plotlines. The sidequests also offer Nicole's perspective on what was happening aboard the Ishimura, and give you more insight into the cruelties of the main antagonist, Dr Mercer, who's now a more fully-developed character.

Motive's done a great job in judiciously adding layers to the original story, focusing on existing but underdeveloped elements, and just generally giving players more insight into the Ishimura and its conflicts prior to Isaac's arrival. It makes the first *Dead Space* fit far better with the other games from a lore and continuity perspective, but it's the execution that really lands, with no oversteps or overly significant changes. Subsequent playthroughs even provide extra audio logs and Easter eggs.

Yet the overall effect is weirdly frustrating. On one level it's amazing that so much effort has gone into re-developing the original game's plotline, but at the same time, this effort could've been equally well applied to a new *Dead Space*. It's hard not to feel the same way about the improved sound design and visuals. The remake was built from the ground-up using the Frostbite engine, and looks and sounds incredible.

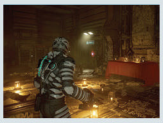
All of which mainly makes me want to play a new non-remade *Dead Space* game in 2023 with this production quality. Another aspect of the frustration is that another game might've had space to push some of the remake's new ideas and mechanics further.

But it also speaks to how strong this remake is that my primary complaint is wishing the care and effort went into a sequel. This game could have gone further in terms of adding replayability for older areas since, beyond weapon upgrades, you don't really need credits or ammo from Security Clearance stashes beyond a certain point. The sidequests mostly run parallel to the main story, too, so while they add a nice complementary layer, they don't add much extra playtime.

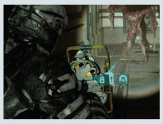
It took me around 12 hours to complete everything on medium difficulty, but the remake also features new game plus with harder enemies and 12 hidden marker fragments that unlock an alternate ending if found. So even though it's a little on the shorter side, this is what *Dead Space* has always been: an intense, momentum-driven experience. Most of all, I'm just happy *Dead Space* is back and *Dead Space* is good. ■

DEAD NEW

So what does the remake add?



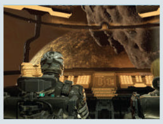
IMPROVED VISUALS
The remake was built from the ground up in the Frostbite engine.



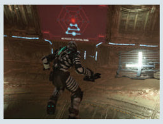
BETTER GUNS
Weapons have new special abilities; such as the Pulse Rifle's proximity grenades.

SIDE STORIES
New sidequests tell the story of Nicole, and Brant Harris, patient zero for the Necromorph attack.

NEW GAME+
After you've completed it you can jump back in with Phantom Necromorphs.



SECRET ENDING
If you can find 12 Marker Fragments in new game+ you can unlock a new ending for Isaac.



ZERO-G
Dead Space now has the free-floating sections seen in the second and third games.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The *Dead Space* remake is a triumphant return for the beloved survival horror series. Hopefully more will follow.

84

KEEP IN CONTACT SPORT

ROLLER DRAMA is a narrative game with a few bruises

By Samantha Greer

Anyone who knows me would be surprised to know I've actually never played roller derby. Violence on wheels? Seems like my thing. Thankfully, *Roller Drama* has come along to not only offer me a taste of the sport, but the drama and camaraderie that surrounds it. When it's not getting tackled by its own UI shortcomings, *Roller Drama* skates on its characters, art style, and the near unbearable responsibility of being a team coach.

You take on the role of Joan 'Jeanne D'Arc' Galliano, a coach for a women's roller derby team who have all moved in to the same house together. The game is split between the hijinks of keeping your team, plus their personal lives, in order and winning matches. It's part management game, part visual novel, though if there are branching paths in the story it was hard for me to notice. I was drawn into the role of Joan, stressing over how to speak to the women under my care. Usually in games relationships are defined simply by wanting characters to like you but in *Roller Drama*, as a coach, you're also worried about being respected and trusted. Giving you a specific role to play gives the narrative an interesting angle that made me think about choices beyond trying to get on everyone's good side.

> **There's a genuine sense of getting to grips with your team**

Matches themselves are where you get to flex your head for strategy. You watch the game play out in real time from above, giving direct inputs to your jammer while giving instructions to the rest of your team, who have to balance breaking up the enemy defence, protecting their own jammer and slowing down the enemy team's jammer. It seems simple at a glance but timing and tactics really are difficult to get right, plus you have to manage your team's energy levels so they don't get exhausted before the match is over. There's a genuine sense of getting to grips with your team, slowly finding your synergy so you can win big at the grand finale.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Narrative and sports management game

EXPECT TO PAY
$21.95

DEVELOPER
Open Lab Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-4790K,
16GB RAM,
GeForce GTX 970

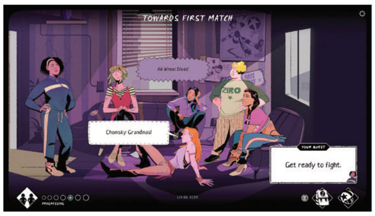
MULTIPLAYER
No

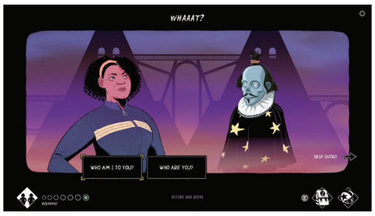
LINK
open-lab.com/games/rollerdrama

None of which would work at all if your team wasn't compelling, but thankfully they're a colourful, diverse bunch, all terribly flawed. Accommodating them will require a lot of working delicately around their issues, as direct confrontation is seldom the answer to problems here since upsetting anyone too much will mean they'll leave the team, which is game over. Rather than a delicate rumination on anyone's idiosyncrasies, *Roller Drama* is an absurdist, almost sitcom-esque, series of comedies as you resolve conflict in truly strange ways. Like getting your player, Anne, to hand over a pair of skates she stole from a teammate, Portia, that she dislikes by making her hold a magical disco ball that gives them a bit of euphoria.

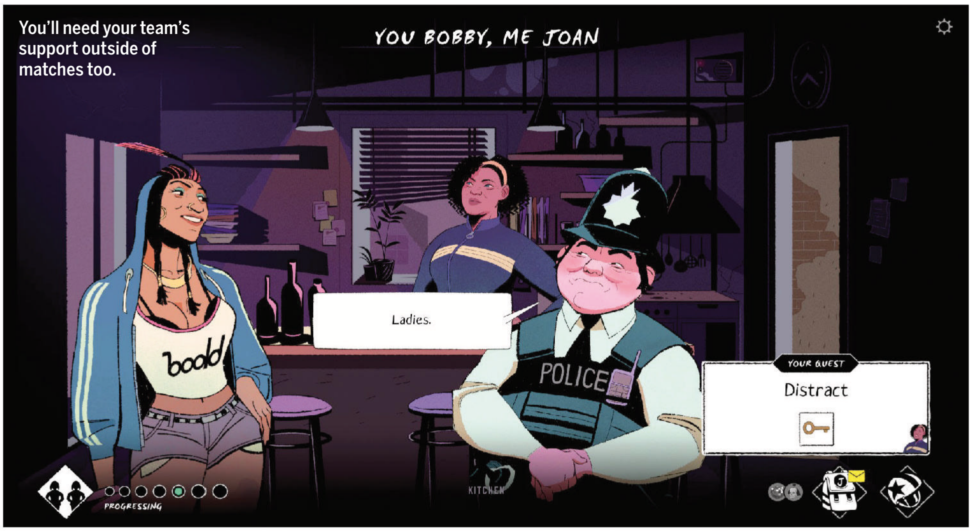
CATCH YOU SKATER

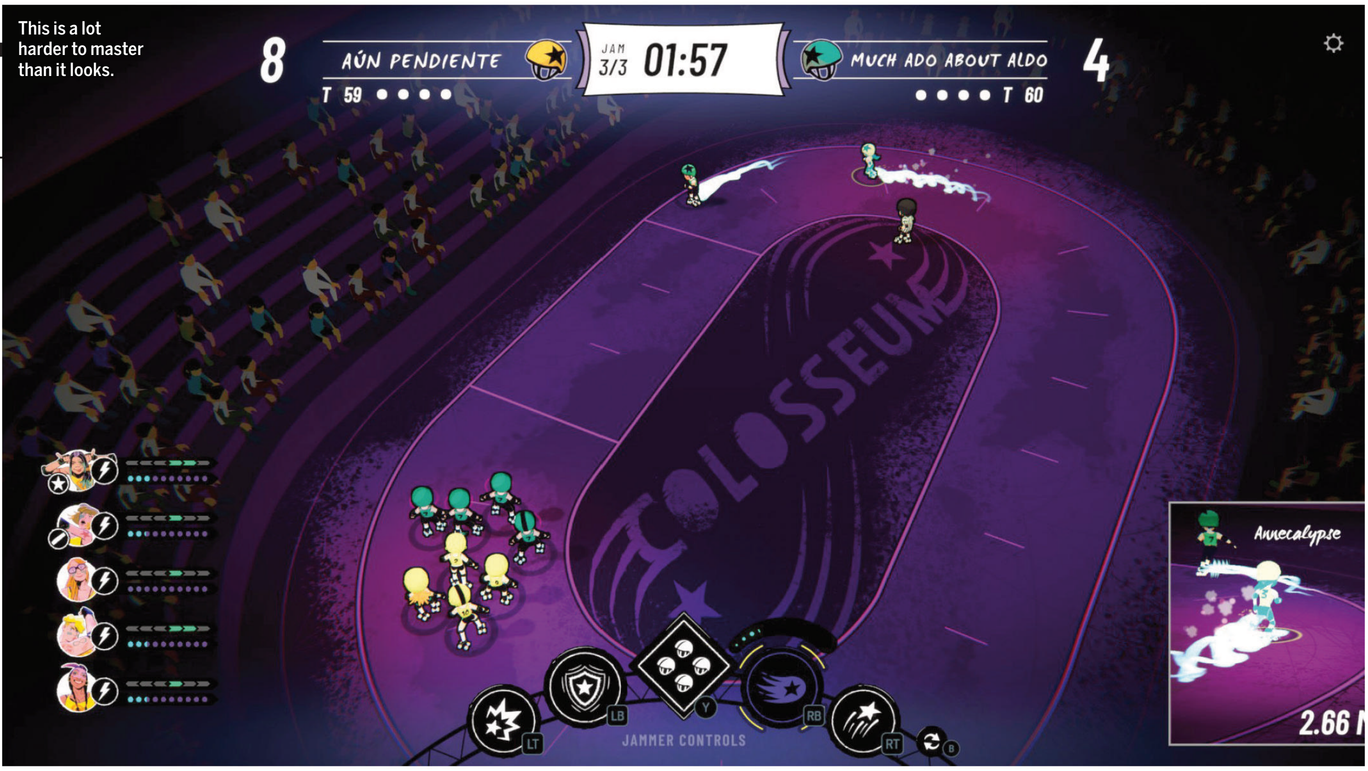
Unfortunately this does have the downside of making the game's puzzles sometimes inscrutable. Almost every time a new quest was given for me to solve, I was immediately lost, failing to grasp the specific order of actions that had to



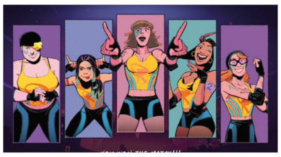


TOP: Picking the team name, the most important choice


You'll need your team's support outside of matches too.



This is a lot harder to master than it looks.



ABOVE: These women are all deeply flawed but I love them all the same.

FAR RIGHT: How do these women afford the rent on a place like this?!

be taken for things to be resolved. The aforementioned disco ball might be the puzzle's solution, but getting there involves first going into Anne's room to discover she has stolen a pair of skates but NOT taking them – because that'll upset her and you'll have to retry. You then must then sneak into Portia's room to find the disco ball and get it to Anne without crossing paths with Portia. It's a lot of trial and error, basically.

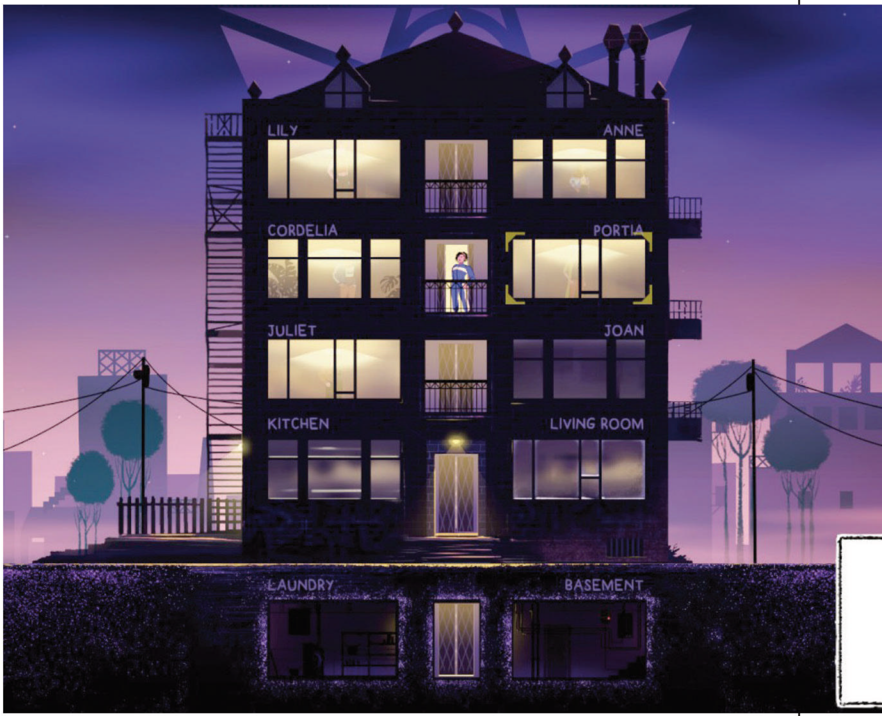
Roller Drama is nice to look at while you struggle, at least. The character designs are fun but it's the big cross section of their house that I especially love, watching all the characters battle for use of the elevator. Despite the charming visuals, the UI is often unreadable, if not outright broken. Too frequently I would think I was selecting one option on a menu only to end up picking the one above or below it.

Issues like this are a shame, because when *Roller Drama* got out of its own way I became really invested in looking after my little team of lovable misfits. Like them, *Roller Drama* has a lot of flaws, but its heart and raw enthusiasm shines through. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

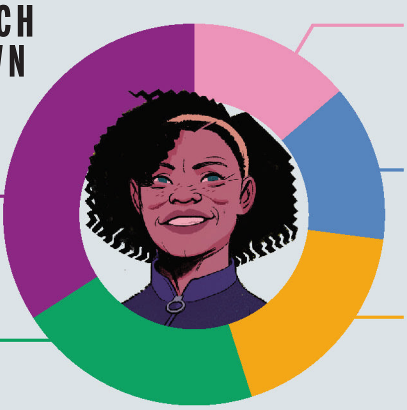
Roller Drama from Open Lab Games is charming, but undermined by technical issues and obtuse puzzles.

66



POST-MATCH BREAKDOWN

All the players on the field



34%
VISUAL NOVEL
Your MVP, the one carrying the whole game with plenty of witty dialogue.

21%
ART STYLE
The heart that brings the whole team together.

13%
MANAGEMENT
They seem important but they're not really up to much.

14%
BAD UI
That one player who's sabotaging the match.

18%
SPORTS GAME
The underdog, the toughest but most compelling player.

ON THE CRUISE

ONE PIECE ODYSSEY is an easy-going JRPG romp through the manga's history

By Dominic Tarason

Twenty-five years ago, *Half-Life* hit PC, the first PlayStation ruled supreme and a little pirate adventure manga called One Piece began. Now I'm pushing 40, greying and still enjoying the ongoing adventures of rubberised ruffian Luffy and his Straw Hat Pirates. Celebrating a quarter-century at sea, the crew are off on a grand JRPG voyage with *One Piece Odyssey*: a sprawling, charming adventure that creaks under its own scope.

If you've no idea what One Piece is, or have only seen a few episodes of the anime, *Odyssey* probably isn't for you. It's set around 750 episodes into the anime, and assumes knowledge of its characters, their abilities, and their histories. On top of that, most of the game is dedicated to (loosely) retelling the events of four major story arcs, these reprised adventures bookended by a story written specifically for the game.

> **"It was hard for me to stay annoyed at Odyssey – or the giant crab"**

While manga author Eiichiro Oda had minimal input in *Odyssey*'s story, he did contribute some concepts and creature designs, including some adorably doofy monsters. *Odyssey* strands Luffy and crew on Waford, a forgotten island inhabited by a pair of new characters: big-haired explorer Adio and mysterious local girl Lim, who magically strips the crew of their powers before realising they're the good kind of pirates. While mercifully no one has amnesia, the Straw Hat crew have forgotten how to fight, so they're off on an adventure to recover the memory cubes holding their lost battle prowess, and then into the World of Memory to relive four of their most important adventures and brush up on their beatdowns.

THE BLACK SPOT

Odyssey is effectively a massive filler arc – the kind of questionably canonical side adventure the anime has to insert to keep the TV show running weekly. While *Odyssey*'s new story and characters are decent enough for One Piece, where the game narratively shines is, oddly, in retreading old ground.

While these adventures in Memoria are based on past story arcs (Alabasta, Water Seven, Marineford and Dressrosa), the Straw Hat Pirates know this is just a rough approximation of their past adventures, and their actions won't change what actually happened. Despite this they all resolve to do things better. Even if it's just a dream, they're out to save everyone they couldn't, win unwinnable fights and create a happier ending. What could have been a glorified clip show takes on an unexpectedly bittersweet and personal edge, with the heroes getting a chance to see lost and fallen friends one more time.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based JRPG romp through One Piece's past

EXPECT TO PAY
$89.95

DEVELOPER
ILCA, Inc

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

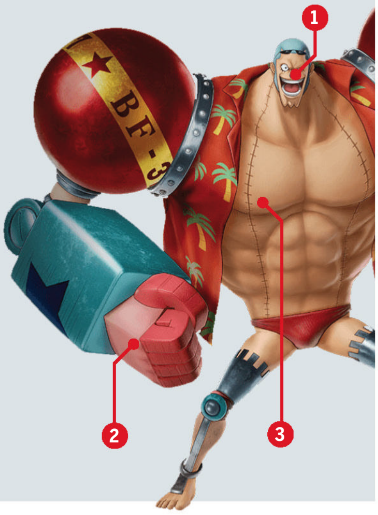
REVIEWED ON
Intel i9-9900k, 32GB RAM, GeForce 2080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
en.bandainamcoent.eu/one-piece/one-piece-odyssey

FRANKY'S FEATURES

Anatomy of a (literally) self-made man



1 HAIR/NOSE By pressing his nose for three seconds, Franky can cycle between several funky hairstyles.

2 HANDS Good for punching, shipbuilding, and hiding an assortment of cannons and deadly energy beam emitters.

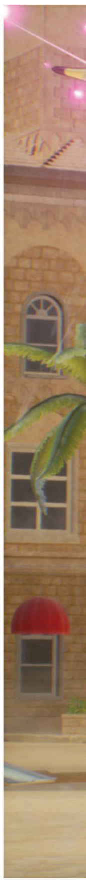
3 NIPPLES Powerful headlights, capable of dazzling foes with his Nipple Light Special combat technique.

It makes for a rich well of character beats compared to the average One Piece filler anime, with each member of the crew getting time in the spotlight to pick apart their feelings and come to terms with their losses. The manga frequently has characters crying rivers of tears over lost friends or sad farewells, while *Odyssey* trades more in coming to terms with the past. Sadly, funky skellington Brook only joins the party late in the game, but the rest of the crew are given room to breathe. At least when they're not getting sidetracked.

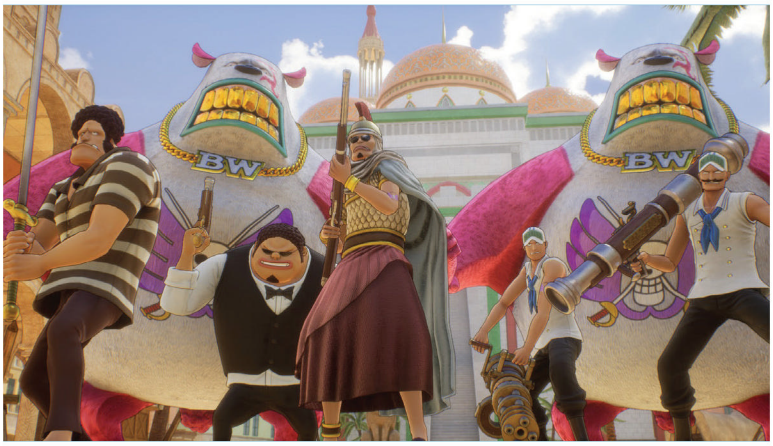
Odyssey is stuffed to bursting with padding, filler within the filler. It's not just sidequests, grinding and scouring maps for treasure – the main story often forgets where it's going. In one particularly egregious case, a chase across the desert to save a friend gets delayed by bandits stealing the crew's food, a monkey stealing Nami's wallet, a river of quicksand, a spelunking adventure to bypass the quicksand (which fails), and then a big cartoon crab turns up to just take everyone to their destination anyway.

It was hard for me to stay annoyed at *Odyssey* – or the giant crab for that matter. The distractions often lean into One Piece's sillier side, and even these weird story digressions lead to some spectacular boss fights and fun new monsters. There's some great encounters in the optional side-content too, including chasing the bounties on rival pirates who have their own comical gimmicks, like a crew that like to leap dramatically off cliff-tops, but haven't figured out the 'landing safely' part yet. But almost every part of *Odyssey* could use some trimming. Quests could be shortened, the grind reduced and backtracking excised to leave a leaner, faster game.

The main thing you'll be doing in *One Piece Odyssey* is getting into



The world of One Piece is a super silly place.

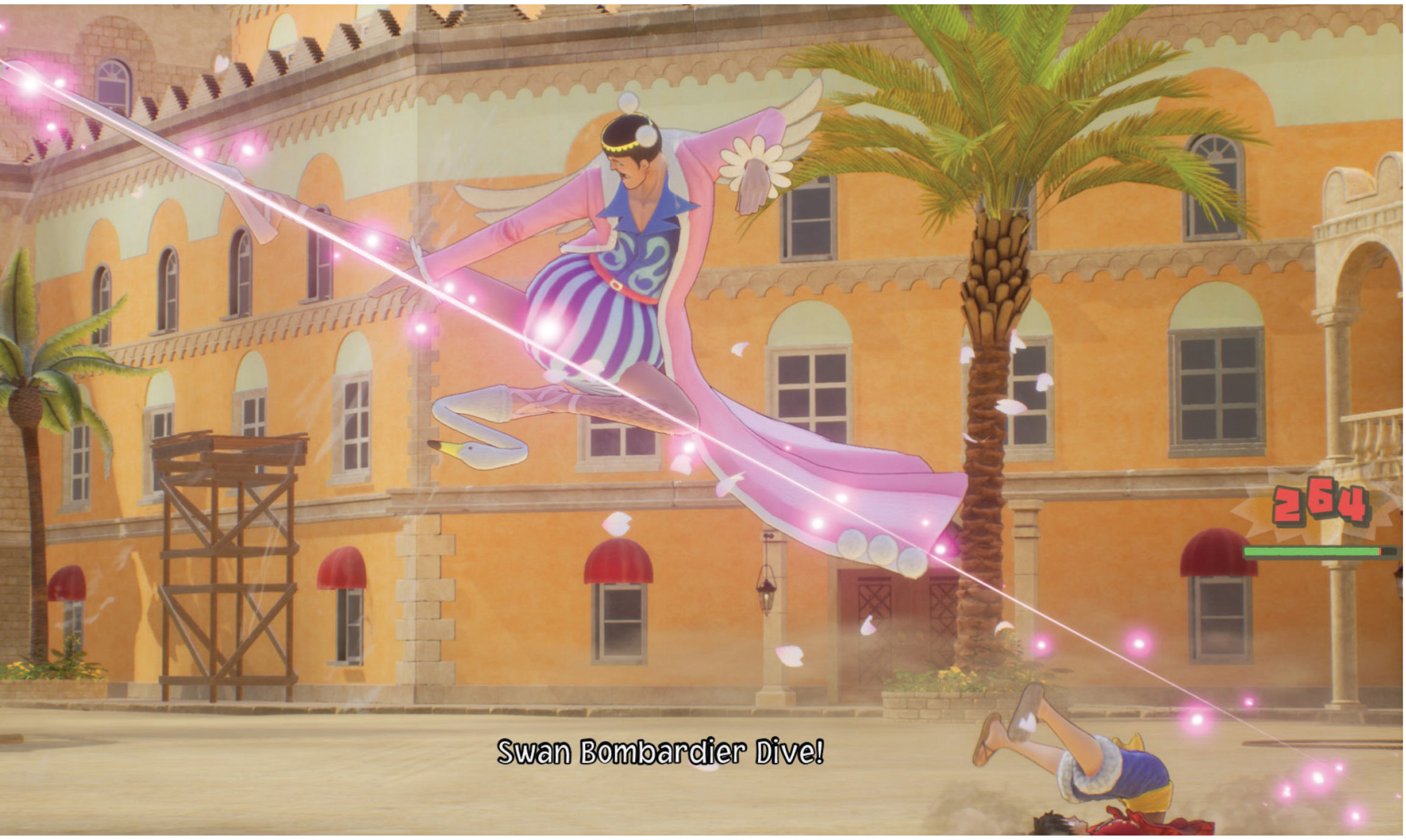


Chopper
Wow!
That's a mountain of junk.

Luffy
All right! Let's party! Make some food, Sanji!

FAR LEFT: Weird as the villains are, their goons are just as crazy and strange.

BELOW: Never underestimate the power of stretchy swan-themed novelty shoes.



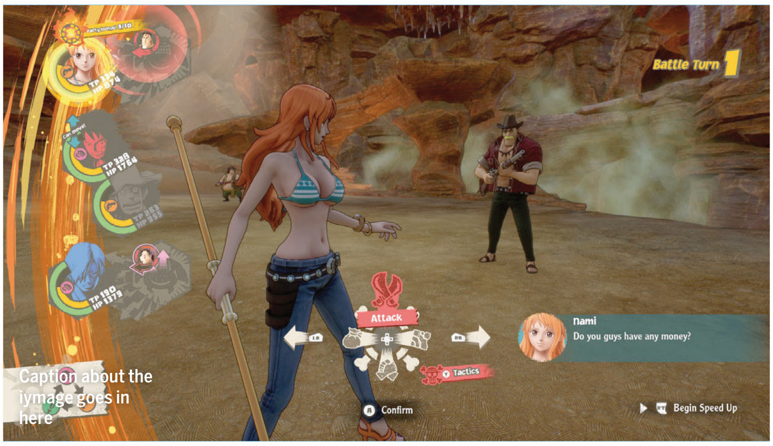
Swan Bombardier Dive!

Vast Quicksand
Access Crabby Port

FAR RIGHT: Nami never misses a chance to shake down villains.

BELOW: Past, future, Luffy doesn't care... Or particularly understand.

Gum-Gum Jet Whip!


Party bonus! 9/10
TP 334 HP 874
Can move!
TP 328 HP 1764
TP 263 HP 955
TP 190 HP 1379
Battle Turn 1
Attack
LB
RB
Tactics
Confirm
Begin Speed Up

nami
Do you guys have any money?

Caption about the iymage goes in here

Luffy
Hey! Long time no see, Vivi!

turn-based JRPG fights, and fortunately, filler or no, battles are cleverer than I expected. I'd have been happy enough if this game mimicked *Dragon Quest*, but the developer put some real thought into how to replicate the sprawling, messy cartoon brawls of the source material in an accessible turn-based combat engine. I took on super-powered naval officers, screen-filling monsters and many caves full of bandits, and I was always happy to see the Straw Hat Pirates throwing hands against often overwhelming odds.

> **"One Piece Odyssey lacks difficulty settings or scaling"**

EVERYBODY WAS KUNG-FU DUGONG

Battles in *One Piece Odyssey* are initially familiar – four of my characters taking turns to trade punches with a bunch of enemies – but the scale is novel. Each party member can engage with a separate enemy group of up to four enemies in their own part of the battlefield. While some attacks are limited to targeting nearby foes, others can be used to hit distant enemies, or go bowling for meatheads by slamming one mook into their nearby buddies. I'm especially fond of attacks that launch enemies toward a distant crewmate, leading to fun mid-battle banter. Some of Luffy's crew appreciate fresh targets, while others would prefer less on their plates.

Surprise bonus objectives called Dramatic Scenes are an extra twist. Sometimes the game will ask you to finish an enemy with a specific character or rescue a crewmate before they get hit by a big charge-up attack. Completing these objectives can give a hefty XP boost, and sometimes the system is used to inject a little more character into the battles too. If Sanji and Zoro are standing together, their rivalry might result in some banter and their Technique Points (this game's MP equivalent) being fully recharged.

Despite all of these neat details, *One Piece Odyssey* lacks difficulty settings or scaling, meaning the first five to ten hours are extremely easy. Even without paying attention to stats and largely ignoring synergies between characters, it wasn't until 15 hours into *Odyssey* that I saw my first character knocked out, and a quick healing item saw them revived just a few seconds later. The difficulty does even out a bit after that point, but that's quite a long time to wait for any kind of challenge.

SMOOTH SAILING

Still, even when they're easy, the fights are fun to watch. One Piece is beautifully replicated, capturing the visual tone of the anime, but channelling a little of the manga's style by rendering shadows as increasingly dense shading lines, mimicking Oda's art. It's a deeply charming detail that felt so natural I didn't notice it at first. It helps the exaggerated, googly-eyed cartoon monster designs work in 3D and fit in naturally with the more restrained geography.

While largely linear, the dungeons and towns of *One Piece Odyssey* are fun to wander through and poke at. In the overworld each character has their own interaction abilities: Luffy can cross gaps with his stretchy rubber arms, Zoro can slice through metal bars, Franky can build bridges over specific gaps, and Sanji can smell fresh ingredients a mile away. It's often worth taking the time to chat to the NPCs too. While not materially rewarding, they've got plenty of little gags to add – guards who forgot their weapons at home, bandits questioning their career choices, shopkeepers haggled into the ground by Nami, and sassy talking animals translated by Chopper.

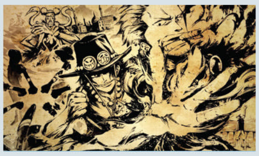
Charming as the NPCs are, they don't get much in the way of animation, with conversations outside of major plot scenes looking a bit stiff and awkward. Thankfully, the combat animations are a treat. Most characters (not Brook – the undead get no respect) have an unreasonably long list of attacks representing almost every notable named technique or attack panel from the manga. These animations are fast, clear, and bursting with nostalgia. Thankfully there's an option to double the speed of all combat animations so they never grate like an overly long and unskippable *Final Fantasy* summon.

Tech-wise there's little to complain about here beyond a lack of ultrawide monitor support. There's a decent range of graphical and control settings, and it plays equally well on gamepad or mouse/keyboard. It even supports high refresh rates, which looks great in combat, although some cutscenes only run at 30fps. If you've got a Steam Deck, you'll probably want to cap the game to 30fps for consistency and battery savings, but you should have no problems otherwise. (Not quite a technical note, but *Odyssey* only contains Japanese audio. Subtitles or bust, and some incidental chatter doesn't get translated at all.)

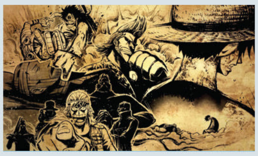
Odyssey is a fine new adventure with an unexpectedly bittersweet tone, expanding the world of a venerable manga/anime. It celebrates 25 years of pirate adventures, while capturing the faintly sad vibes surrounding the announcement of its final saga. Much like the TV anime, it's a little flabby, and some trimming would have made for a consistently thrilling 30-hour game instead of a meandering 50-hour one. Still, if you've been following One Piece all this time, the chances are you're here for a leisurely cruise, rather than a race to the finish. ■

ARCING TOWARDS ADVENTURE

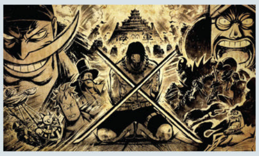
***The manga story arcs featured in* Odyssey**



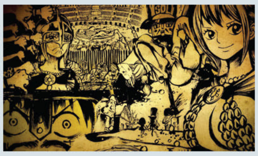
ALABASTA
Luffy and crew save a desert kingdom from a casino-owning superpowered gangster.



WATER SEVEN
The search for a shipwright leads to a grand adventure and the loss of the Straw Hats' ship.



MARINEFORD
Luffy's family take the stage on both sides of a titanic clash between pirates and the navy.



DRESSROSA
Magic, mythology and one of One Piece's most sadistic villains; the flamboyant Doflamingo.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***One Piece Odyssey* is cosy, meandering fun for One Piece fans, but swabbies should set sail from other ports.**

78

DEEP DOWN

COLOSSAL CAVE is an education in ’70s adventure game design

By Jeremy Peel

Every child who falls in love with a fantasy novel dreams of its big-screen adaptation. But every adult who has seen that monkey’s paw curl knows the cost. The director’s lens replaces the mind’s eye, becoming the definitive vision of a place that was once malleable and personalised. That beloved world shrinks to become tangible – sacrificing the infinite scale and limitless budget of the imagination.

It’s this conundrum that haunts *Colossal Cave*, a new version of *Colossal Cave Adventure*, a text adventure from the late 1970s. While not the first attempt at a graphical reimagining of its namesake, it is the first to render the cave in full 3D, with WASD and mouse controls, leaving nothing to the imagination whatsoever.

The prose lives on as narration, which is thoughtfully implemented as a ‘look’ interaction attached to your cursor – always available to flesh out a scene or describe an object, but rarely forced upon you. And its presence allows you to appreciate just how faithful a rendition this is. The level designers of Cygnus Entertainment, led by *King’s Quest* legend Roberta Williams, deserve kudos for translating a tangle of flowery descriptions into a consistent geographical space, lending a natural flow to the initial journey down from a forest well house and through a hatch into the cave network below.

GRAPHIC IN NATURE

Yet that narration also highlights the compromises made to bring *Colossal Cave* into new dimensions with a small development team. What 3D art can live up to the idea of a “splendid chamber, the walls frozen rivers of orange stone”? Certainly not that which you’ll find here. Then there’s the outsized abode of a giant, its ceiling “too high to see with your lamp”. Except that, now, you can see it – a fact that somewhat takes away from the scene’s implied vastness.

Your goal is to find treasure that will contribute to your point total

This game was in many ways a blueprint for the point-and-click adventure genre as we still know it today, asking you to scour the environment for objects to place in your inventory, and then to find places where those objects might be applied to allow you further progress. Ultimately, your goal is to find treasure that will contribute to your point total, up to a maximum of 350. You’ll get a handful of points for discovering shiny things, but a whole lot more for delivering them to the starting well house.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A slavish graphical remake of a classic ’70s text adventure

EXPECT TO PAY
$36.50

DEVELOPER
Cygnus Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600X, 16GB RAM, Geforce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
colossalcave3d.com

One treasure, a nugget of gold as large as a human head, is too heavy to take back up the stairs – which clues you into the idea that there might be ways to get back and forth across the map magically, using spellwords whispered to you in the darkness. Often, you’re forced to make a tough decision about whether to drop a fistful of diamonds to make room for a more innocuous item that might prove to be a puzzle solution – knowing you’ll want to come back for the former eventually.

Considering its age, *Colossal Cave*’s puzzle logic is surprisingly robust – much of it extending naturally and pleasingly from the small pool of tools available to you. But surrounding these puzzles are elements that have weathered the decades less well. Take the dwarves, who intermittently spring out of the earth to hurl a knife in your direction. They usually miss, but an RNG-determined hit will kill you instantly, sending you back to the well house. Worse, resurrection has a cost, pulling directly from your point total – making a perfect score a frustrating ambition to reach for.

Then there are *Colossal Cave*’s mazes, so notorious at the time that one repeated description, “You are in a maze of twisty little passages, all alike,” has resonated across the years, becoming a byword in hacker culture for a situation in which no possible action affects the outcome. Escape is possible, with patience, but torment is inevitable. A fact which makes you wonder whether parts of *Colossal Cave* might have been better left buried deep beneath the rock. Both from a design and aesthetic perspective, there are far fairer caverns to delve into these days. ■

TAKING INVENTORY

Don’t descend without these essential items

COMPASS
A shortcut to the automap, a mercy in those warrens.

MAGAZINE
A print product can be a breadcrumb in a maze.

KEYS
These let you into the cave, and more besides.

LANTERN
Keep it turned on at all times. You know, in order to see.

AXE
The only way to deal with randomly-attacking dwarves.

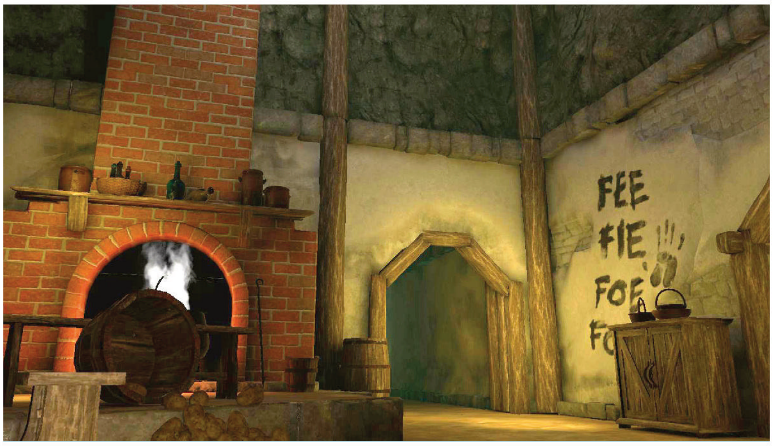
BOTTLE
Can be filled with water or oil to solve different puzzles.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Colossal Cave is certainly One for nostalgists and those who just love getting lost on spelunking holidays.

55

This axe you can pick up and hurl about yourself.


FEE
FIE
FOE
FO

PLEASE KEEP AREA CLEAN

FAR LEFT: Keep an eye out for shiny golden eggs in giantsville.

LEFT: Stroking this cobra won't help you circumvent it.

SW
W
NW
N
NE
E
SE

Caverns are interlinked, so there's often another way around.

DON'T SPEAK

FORSPOKEN could have been excellent if it tried a little harder

By Mollie Taylor

On paper, *Forspoken* is a videoame that should have resonated with me. It's a Luminous Productions/Square Enix venture, a developer I remain deathly loyal to despite its poor track record in more recent years. You see, *Forspoken* features some of my favourite things in life: nail art, cats, parkour and badass matriarchal rulers.

Yet, *Forspoken* is let down by its sheer unwillingness to break the mould. In many ways, it's the exact type of game you've seen countless times across the last 15 years. An open world RPG with superpowers, mystical creatures, and a terrifying world-ending threat. It does play into some isekai tropes, with protagonist Frey Holland whisked away from her New York home and plonked into a fantastical world. Along with her talking bracelet companion Cuff, she navigates the world of Athia and the Break which threatens to consume the land and everyone in it.

> **Combat and movement are the best things about this game**

A-FREY'D TO EVOLVE

It's a pedestrian premise, one that never goes anywhere particularly exciting. Its twists and turns feel predictable. Game stories don't necessarily have to have *Bioshock* or *Nier: Automata* levels of clever plot twists, but *Forspoken* too often fails to have fun with its premise. For what it's worth, though, I enjoyed the latter half of the narrative. The beginning of the game is mired by some rather choice story beats, like making Frey a petty criminal who squats in an abandoned apartment and has some troubling run-ins with a local gang. Once it stops focusing so heavily on who New York Frey is and puts more emphasis on Athia Frey, it becomes a much more enjoyable story.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world RPG steeped in isekai tropes

EXPECT TO PAY
$114.95

DEVELOPER
Luminous Productions

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 2700X, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

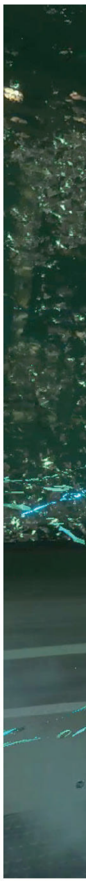
LINK
forspoken.square-enix-games.com

Despite a cringeworthy trailer that showcased some toe-curling dialogue, *Forspoken* isn't really filled with many moments that made me recoil in embarrassment. The dialogue from the infamous trailer – which came from an early cutscene – is by far the worst offender. Everything else was fairly standard, though that may be my long-developed immunity to Square Enix dialogue a la *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy*.

It's made better by the fact that I really enjoyed Frey as a character. As a woman who also has some potty mouth tendencies and struggled to fit in as a young adult, I found her wonderfully relatable. Sure she says 'fuck' way too much, but so do I! She's one of the more relatable heroes I've played in games recently, and I really wish she'd been in a game that did her more justice. I also thoroughly enjoyed the rapport between her and Cuff, even if the frequency of their back-and-forth is a lot. Mercifully, it can be tweaked in the settings or turned off entirely.

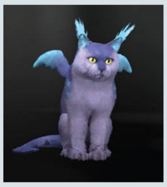
The most fun I had in *Forspoken* was when I ignored the story and explored Athia instead. Combat and movement is the best thing about this game, with Frey able to parkour at lightning speed around the world and fling spells of different elements at enemies. Dashing across the map, flipping up cliffs and zipping around feels really good. But bring things a little more close quarters and it becomes finicky, with Frey regularly bouncing off walls and short platforms. I'm left to sit there waiting for her to calm down and come back down to Earth, which really broke my flow at times. Parkour is also bound to left Ctrl by default, which is a horribly inconvenient location for a button that's used for both traversing the world and dancing around enemies. I ended up rebinding it around 15 hours in, my poor wrist buckling under the constant twisting.

Forspoken's magic covers the four basic elements – earth, fire, water and air – with support and damage-based spells at Frey's fingertips. I had a great time sidestepping or flipping over enemies, shooting a huge spiky boulder into their back or lifting them up into a bubble which, when shot, caused a huge area attack to any »

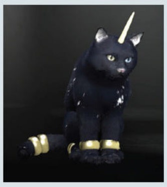


FEELINE FINE

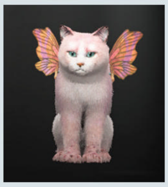
Forspoken is a cat lover's heaven. Here are my faves



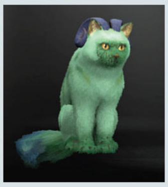
CLERE
Clere looks so chill. Not a thought behind his eyes. He's just a lil' guy who loves sleep, cuddles and being fed.



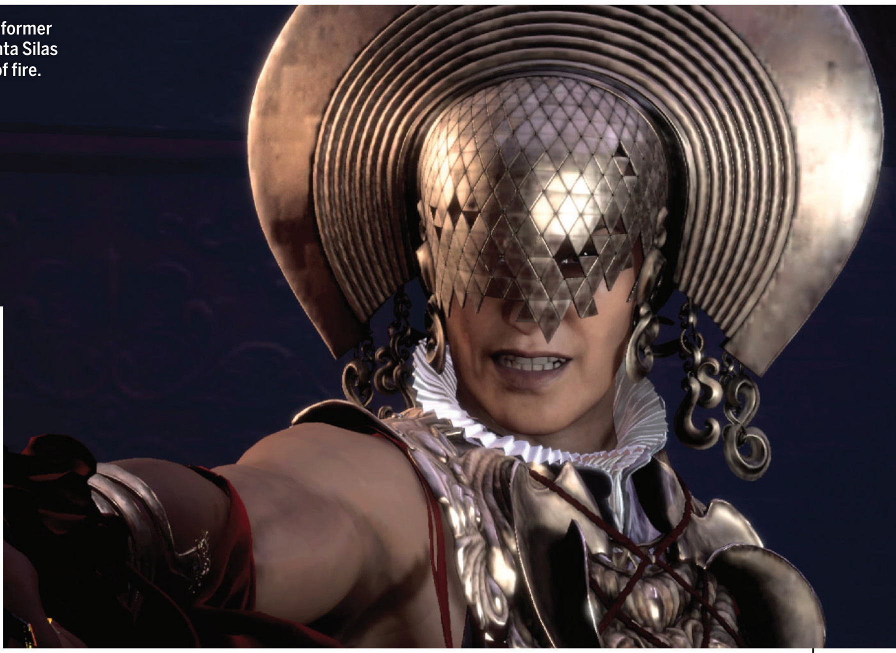
ARAMAK
Aramak appeals to my cold, goth heart. If I could own a slightly strange, fantasy cat, it would be this one.



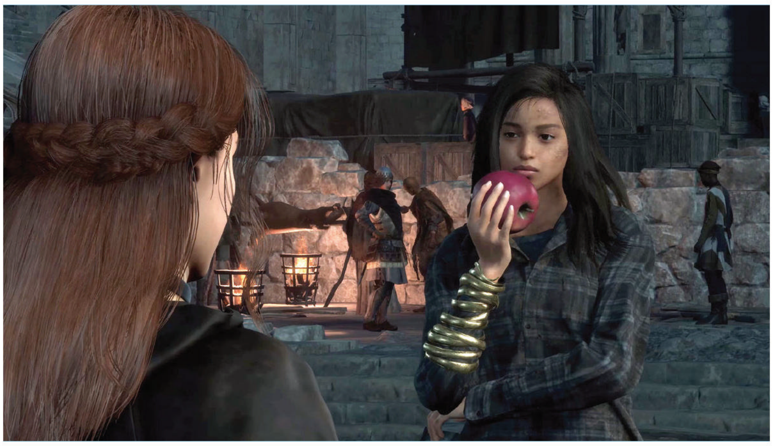
KALPANA
Kalpana may well be the prettiest cat in all of Athia. If she was human, she'd be the popular blonde girl who always had gum.



LEITE
I can't explain this, but Leite reminds me of a smart, kind but slightly frazzled old man. The kind of cat with amazing stories.

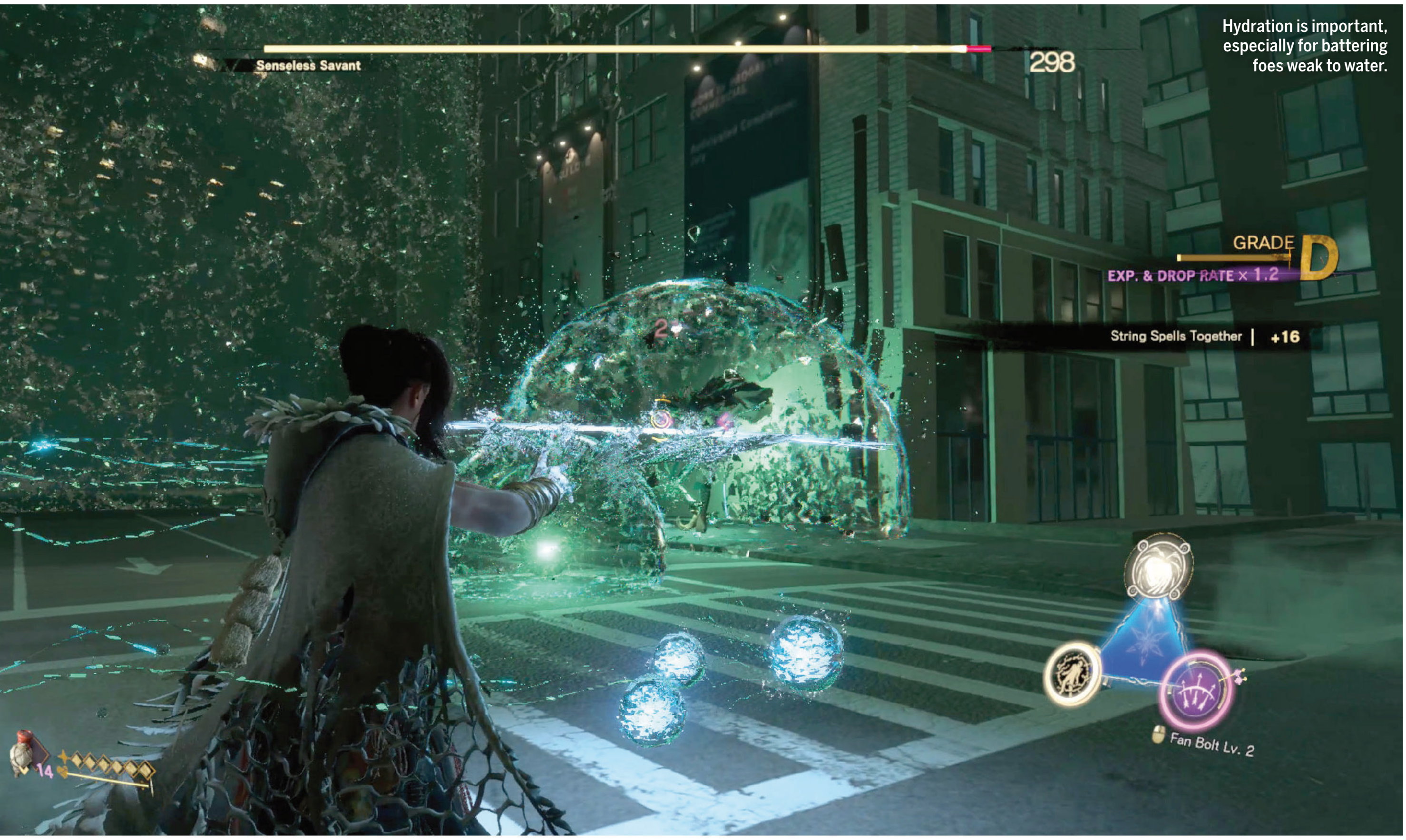


The Tantas are Athia's former matriarchal rulers. Tanta Silas possesses the power of fire.



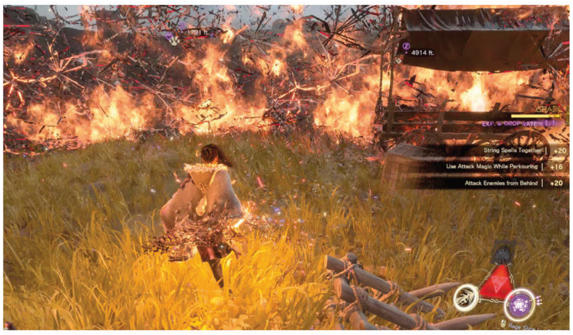
FAR LEFT: *Forspoken* has some comically large apples. I reckon half of that a day would keep the doctor away.

LEFT: Combat is graded based on performance. Damage taken decreases score, while evasion increases it.


Senseless Savant
298
GRADE D
EXP. & DROP RATE × 1.2
String Spells Together | +16
Fan Bolt Lv. 2
14

Hydration is important, especially for battering foes weak to water.

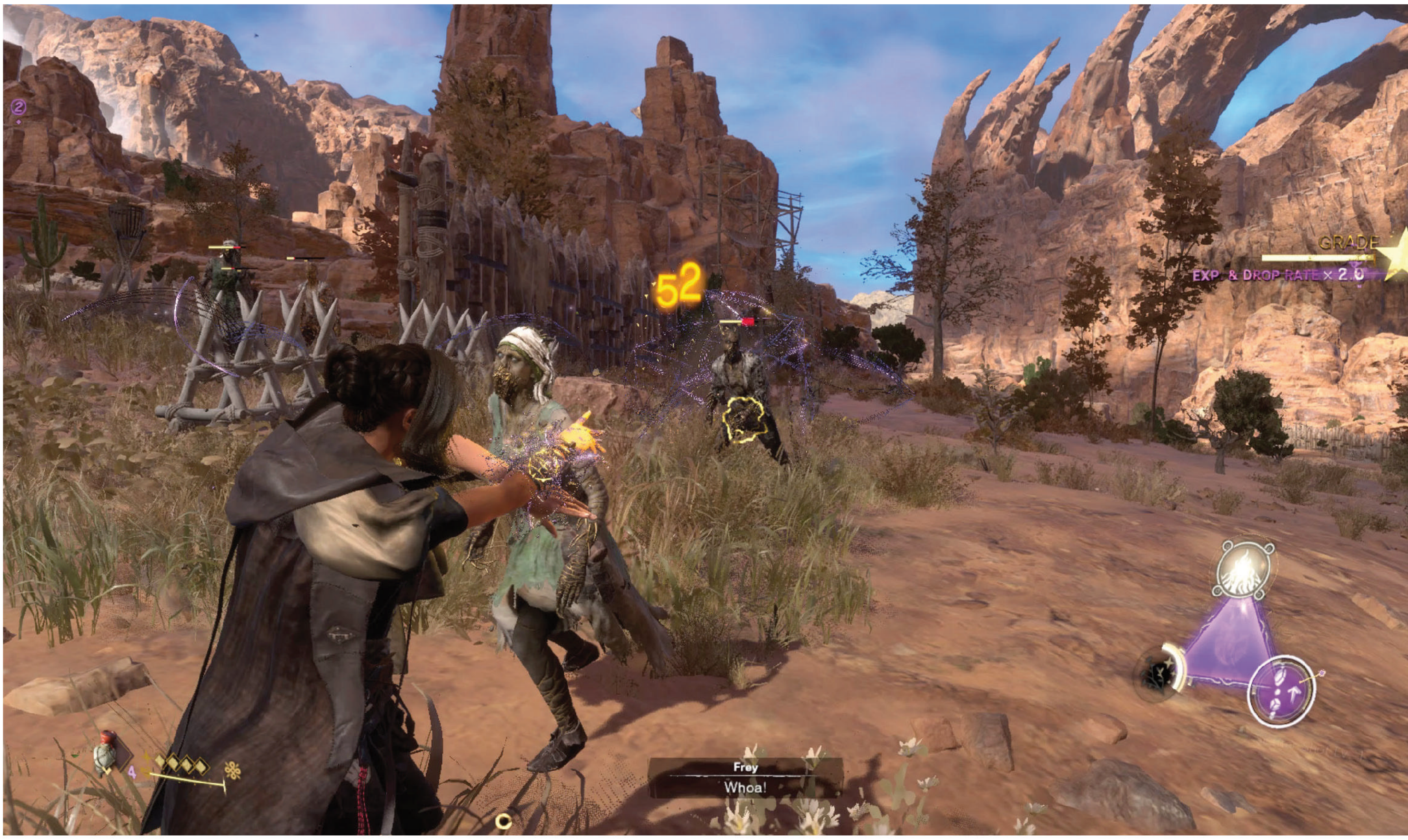
Frey is a fine protagonist, one that would've thrived in a better game.


4914 ft.
String Spells Together
Use Attack Magic While Parkouring
Attack Enemies from Behind

RIGHT: G... good doggies. Nice doggies.

FAR RIGHT: Thanks, Frey, for third-wheeling a touching family reunion.

BELOW: The Break has turned many of Athia's inhabitants into zombies. Poor fellas.


52
GRADE
EXP. & DROP RATE × 2.0
Frey
Whoa!

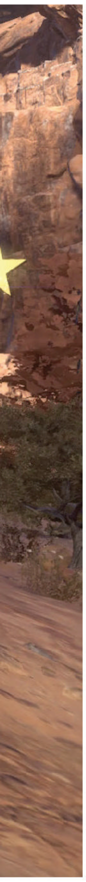
of their buddies unlucky enough to be nearby. I would've loved to see the elements play together and react with each other more, but the most frustrating thing of all is that you don't get your hands on the full toolkit until the very end of the game.

Now, I can hardly fault a game for failing to come into its own until the very end – I'm a regular defender of *Final Fantasy XIV*'s slow start and I've tallied up a number of JRPGs in my lifetime. But *Forspoken* could have been so much better if it took where you end up 25 hours into the game and fed it to you 15 hours sooner. You don't get your final set of spells until right before the final boss, which feels like a huge oversight to me. The way your moves are fed to you makes sense within the narrative, but it feels horrible for keeping the game engaging across its entire run.

> **I had an absolute mission trying to get it to run well on my PC**

NAILED IT

Enemies are interesting enough, with some being weak to certain types or magic or susceptible to status ailments. When they're not dotted around the world, they're plonked inside very bland repeatable dungeons or fortresses scattered around the map in a Ubisoft-style range of objective-based pit stops. These at least offer rewards in the form of cloaks, necklaces and different nail art, which Frey can equip to bolster her health, magic and defence. But the dungeons are all samey, rarely offering up much challenge. Hop into an instanced area, run down a corridor to a room of enemies and batter them. Rinse and repeat. Fortresses are much the same, simply taking place in the overworld instead.



Mutants were my favourite bits of combat in *Forspoken* – giant, ultra-strong beasts dotted around the overworld. They're the toughest foes I faced throughout my playthrough, but I also found them a great way to get in the habit of memorising patterns and honing my evade timing. At least, when I could even figure out what was going on between the stutters.

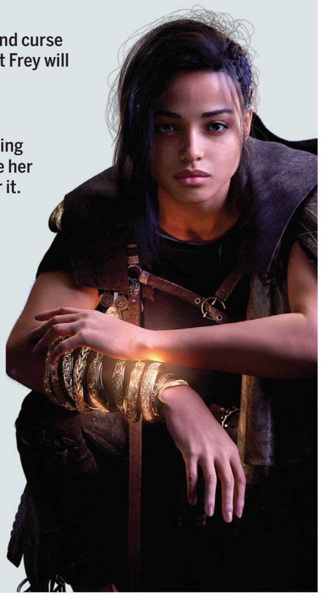
I had an absolute mission trying to get *Forspoken* to run well on my PC, resulting in severe frame drops every time I entered combat. I don't have a terrible rig by any means, my biggest shortcoming being the lack of RAM versus the game's bizarre system requirements. It plonked me on Standard graphic settings by default, but I could barely pull anything above 12fps during combat or while in the main capital city.

In fact, a significant early portion of my 32-hour playthrough was spent tirelessly tinkering with the settings. *Forspoken*'s PC port is horrifically optimised, and it felt like nothing I did was making it run any better. There are some pretty severe texture rendering issues, made even worse when attempting to play in my usual 1440p.

Stones blinked in and out of existence, and doors warped behind characters as they spoke. I was regularly working with sub-20fps and stutters that made me feel nauseous at the beginning of my playthrough. It really squandered my early hours with the game, especially when combat was so heavily affected. In the end, I had to give up on making *Forspoken* look nice and go all-in on making it play nice. If my screenshots here look like ass, that's why.

EASILY FREY'D

What if enemies could analyse Frey?



1 POTTY MOUTH Resistant to foul language and curse words. Any attempts to swear at Frey will be reflected back. Shit!

2 CAT'S PYJAMAS Weak to feline friends. Putting one in her line of sight will cause her to be distracted and chase after it.

3 FRESH CREPS Susceptible to stylish sneakers that will inevitably be displayed on a shelf instead of worn like a normal person.

4 KILLER KINDNESS Resistant to friendliness. Convinced kindness is transactional and will remain hesitant.

5 KING'S ENGLISH The best way to tackle Frey is to be an incessant, unremovable sentient British bracelet that berates her.

MONUMENTAL TASK

Forspoken could have been so much more. I wish Luminous Productions had taken notes from its other game, *Final Fantasy XV*, and created fewer but more elaborate dungeons for me to explore. Instead, too much of the gameplay feels like a generic objective collectathon. If I wasn't getting distracted by grabbing new gear between point a and point b of my story objective, I was making a quick detour to grab a stat increase at a monument or quickly exploring a derelict building, wiping out its enemies and gaining a new nugget of lore for my archive. Occasionally if I went really out of my way, I could find a handful of spells that were locked behind specific objective markers around the map.

The biggest mistake I made during my time with *Forspoken* was doing so much of my exploration early on. If you're going to play it – and it's a game I do think is worth picking up on sale... and also potentially on console depending on your rig – blitz through the story. The true enjoyment comes once you're in the post game, with Frey's full kit at your disposal. When I spent several hours flinging around my one or two spells, I lamented how painfully basic its combat was. Had I been handed more elements earlier on, or simply ignored side tasks in favour of getting access to those, I think my time with *Forspoken* would've been more enjoyable.

It's a game most fun when you're not following its orders. Free of sudden stops for a fade-to-black cutscene, or the game randomly rooting you in place while you initiate dialogue that could have easily happened while on the move. Once the shackles of its limp narrative came off, I finally felt like I was playing the game *Forspoken* was trying to be. Please don't get me wrong, freedom can't cover up vapid gameplay objectives. But hey, it certainly does help.

A game shouldn't have to end to feel like it's just starting. Unfortunately for *Forspoken*, that's exactly what happens. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

65

Forspoken has sparks of greatness, but douses itself in fear of ever being anything other than an upsettingly safe RPG.

TIMELESS CRISIS

PERSONA 3 PORTABLE creeps along, but it's still top-class

By Andrea Shearon

All of my worst thoughts strike in the ungodly hours after midnight. It's quiet, noises I wouldn't usually notice grow louder and I'm painfully aware of every shadowy figure in an unlit room. Sometimes my anxieties spiral out of control thanks to a weird pile of clothes or a blanketless foot. Sometimes it's just a little too dark, and the blank eerie abyss of a dark bedroom goes full-on existential horror.

Persona 3 Portable's fretful cast must share that midnight dread with me, though they have more supernatural terrors to blame. This RPG blend of high school and gothic apocalypse welcomes you with a litany of reminders that time is always running out, and before you even know what it's counting down to, *Persona 3* starts the clock. You've got a year to figure out who, or what, the race is actually against.

> **Layers of green, blue and yellow coat the world in shades of anxiety**

Persona 3 shares most of the social RPG hallmarks I adored in *Persona 4* and *Persona 5*. There's the day-to-day studying, flirting, exams and other school-life woes. At night, the focus shifts to dungeon crawling through the mysterious labyrinth Tartarus. You'll do the usual Persona collecting and Shadow slaying along the way, desperately searching for the omnipotent big bad torturing the city during its nightly Dark Hour. The PC debut is a port of the 2009 PSP retelling, which is divisive for its changes to the sort of 'director's cut' version of the game, the PlayStation 2's *Persona 3 FES*. It's better in some ways and questionable in others.

In *Portable*, Atlus streamlined its approach by replacing most 3D environments with a 2D, point-and-click system and dropping the anime video cutscenes. Events play out through in-game models, text and static artwork. Think more visual novel-like, but with breaks to 3D for dungeon crawling and turn-based battles. It also removes a lengthy epilogue added in *FES* but adds a female protagonist route.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A port of *Persona 3*'s PSP release that includes a new protagonist, battle system changes, and a shift to visual novel-style gameplay

EXPECT TO PAY
$29.95

DEVELOPER
Atlus

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 - 10700k CPU, 64GB RAM, GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

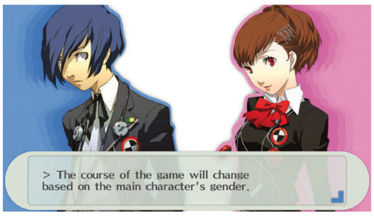
LINK
persona.atlus.com

Those differences are all the same here, but the *Persona 3 Portable* PC release throws in some quality-of-life tweaks, remastered graphics, and Japanese voiceover options.

DREADFULLY GOOD

Portable's PSP origins have grown obvious with age – some scenes work just fine without their original animations, while others fall a bit flat – but the setting remains just as eerie as it was years ago. Those highs and lows start early, when the main character summons their Persona for the first time with the gun-like Evoker pressed to their temple. The moment's tension, once highlighted with an anime cutscene, doesn't come through with just the in-game models. There's not much animation in the original, but this is one of the few moments where the absence hurts.

I miss those sequences, but the world's discomfort and struggles with mortality come through in the writing and art. Everything feels haunted, and when the clock ticks

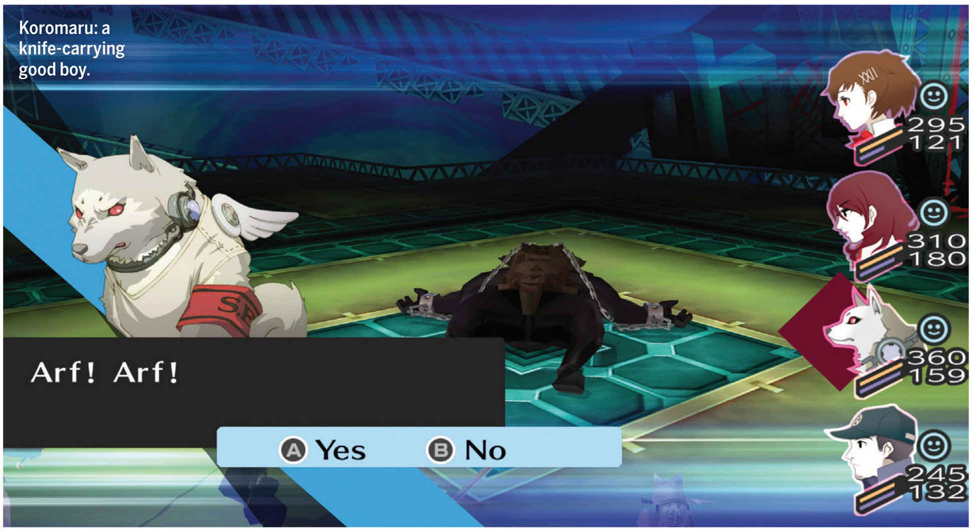


> The course of the game will change based on the main character's gender.

4/ 6 • M
Dark Hour
Next:
3/

Unknown Boy
There's no need to be scared.

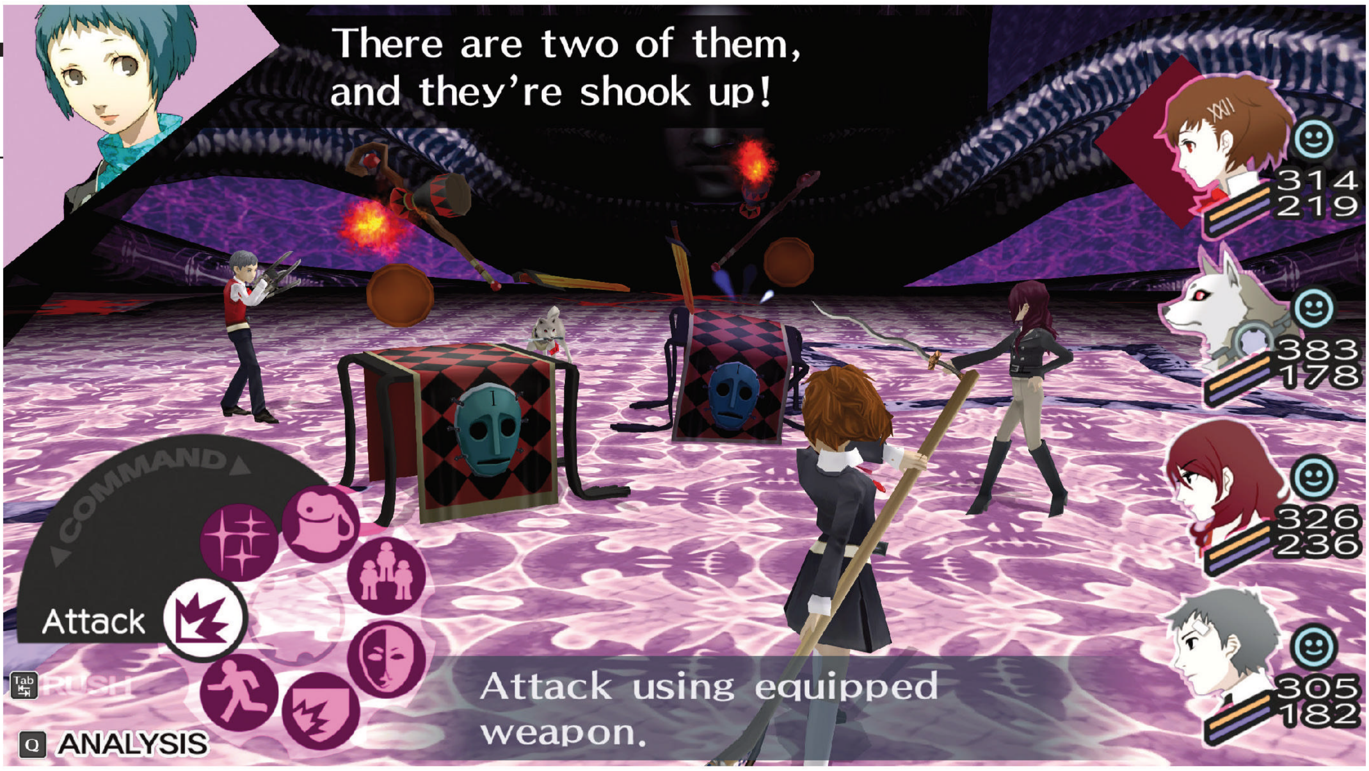
TOP: 'Canon' be damned. She's got the better route.



Koromaru: a knife-carrying good boy.

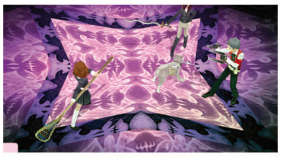
Arf! Arf!

Ⓐ Yes Ⓑ No



There are two of them, and they're shook up!

Attack using equipped weapon.



TOP: *P3P* ditches the original's wonky battle AI.

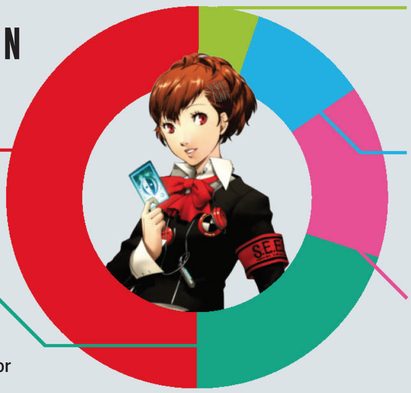
ABOVE: It may drag, but Tartarus is still unnerving.

over to the Dark Hour, *Persona 3* taps into cosmic unease with style. Grungy layers of green, blue and yellow coat the world in shades of anxiety, while the way Tartarus towers over everything establishes its horrifying scale. The Shadows inhabiting the massive dungeon come in all matter of unnatural shapes and movements. Their creepy distortions make climbing the hellish structure less dull, even when I get caught up in comical games of tag trying to sneak up on them.

I default to *Portable*'s female protagonist primarily out of preference for a few Social Link changes made from the male version and the new music. Her iconic blue-bobbed counterpart is the guy referenced in more *Persona 3*-related spin-offs, and the game has a weird moment in character selection where it claims his arc is the better first experience. I see no point in heeding that warning. Neither path needs context from spin-offs or the *FES*-exclusive epilogue to bring its story to a satisfying end.

Portable cleans up the writing in some areas, too. By selecting the female route, I found several friendships and day-to-day interactions change for the better. A few members of your core team (Shinjiro, Akihiko and Junpei) only have Social Links available through her path, but you'll still maintain friendship options with the other

A WEEK AT GEKKOUKAN HIGH



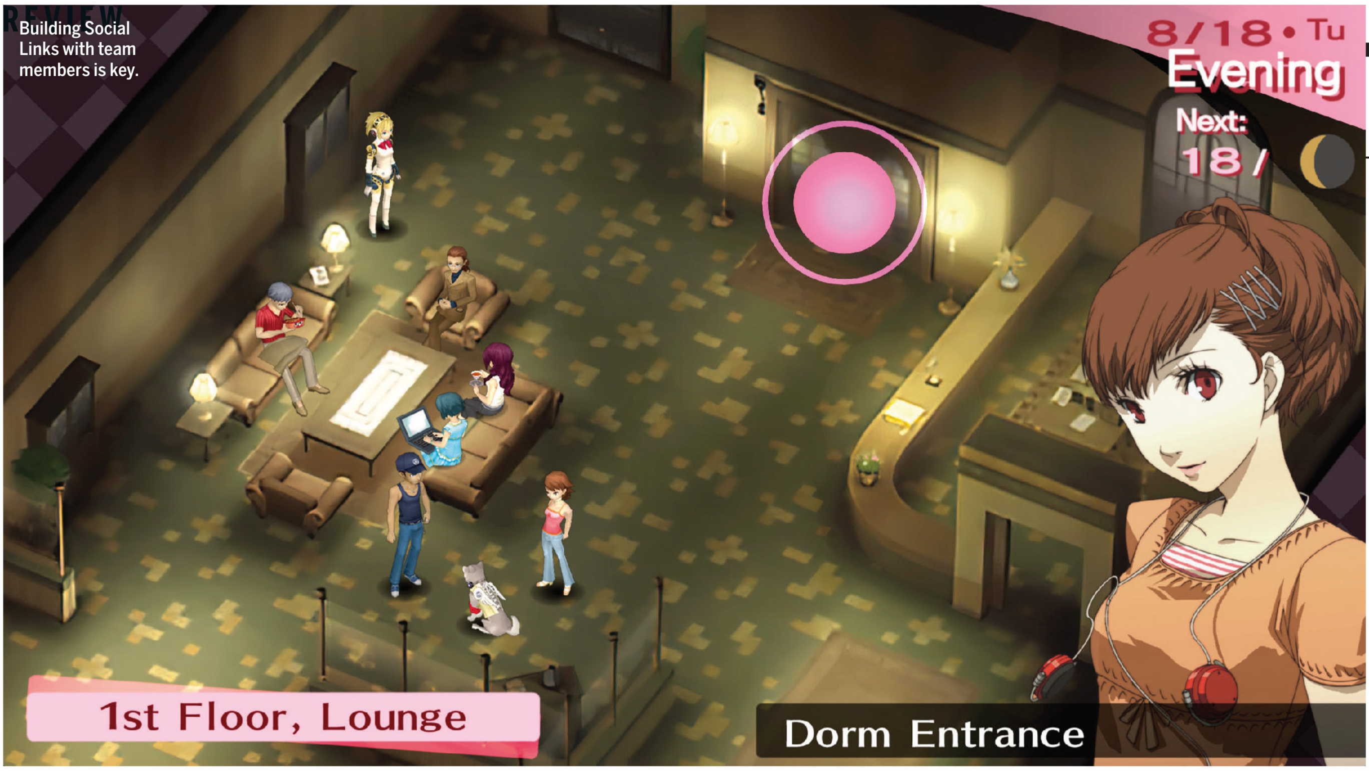
5% FAILING EXAMS
Notice there's no section labelled 'studying for exams'.

50% CLIMBING TARTARUS
The party hits their step goal around floor two.

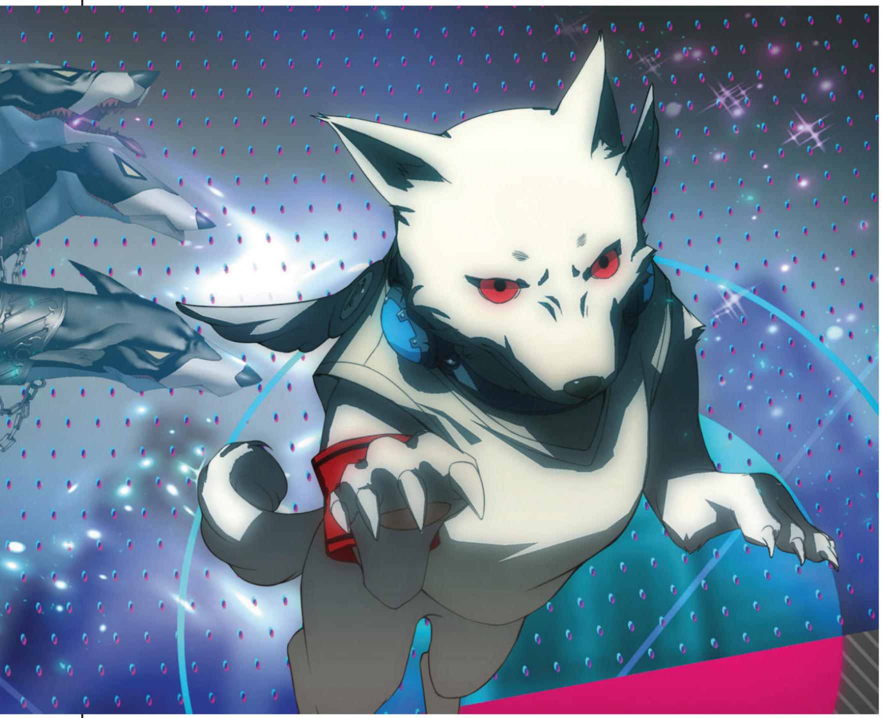
10% THE CREEPY LITTLE BOY
Conversations with the dead-eyed kid at the foot of my bed.

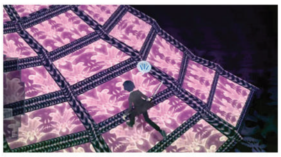
20% VELVET ROOM
Time here should be shorter, but recipes for Persona fusions get complicated.

15% WALKING KOROMARU
I'd welcome the apocalypse before I tell him no.



Building Social Links with team members is key.





TOP: It's an overall upgrade, but some backgrounds scale up rough.

high-school girls in your party. Getting to know characters like Junpei – the resident tough guy – makes his foot-in-mouth babbling more empathetic. Pivotal story beats retain their themes with either protagonist, but I find those turning points more fulfilling after deepening relationships with the crew.

IT'S A LONG WAY UP

While *Persona 3*'s art direction, cast and constant ruminations on fear make it one of Atlus' best, the monotonous dungeon crawling does not. You'll have the option to visit Tartarus on most nights, but the skyscraper-like dungeon isn't nearly as dynamic as those found in *Persona 4* or *Persona 5*. Conceptually and visually, a looming hell tower that ruptures the city skyline every night absolutely rules, but in practice, it adds hours of endless are-we-there-yet grind to the journey.

Combat hurts and helps. *Portable* is the better version of *Persona 3*'s battle system. On the PS2, you only had control over the main character's actions, and AI commanded everyone else. *Portable* lets the player control the entire party, so the game no longer feels punitive thanks to AI goofs. That was always one of my biggest gripes with *FES* – silently praying for Mitsuru to heal me, only to watch her consign me to death.

It wouldn't be *Persona* without collecting the sometimes horrifying,

THE SOCIAL HOUR

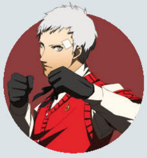
Social Links do more than just empower Personas

SHINJIRO ARAGAKI

He's not quite the hard-ass he pretends to be, but that may go unnoticed if you miss his interactions with the female protagonist.

MITSURU KIRIJO

She may not be a romance option, but Mitsuru's Social Link certainly feels more intimate than friendship from the female protagonist's perspective.



AKIHIKO SANADA

Akihiko's a little more cool and confident in battle. *Persona 3*'s story touches on the loss of his sister but his Social Link dives into how that grief drives his day-to-day.

KOROMARU

Koromaru's design and Social Link are based on Japan's famously loyal pup, HachikÐ. His tale of devotion and love fits perfectly into the setting's challenges.

sometimes adorable demons you'll summon along the way. Fusing together Personas excites the part of my brain that loves an Excel spreadsheet, but how that info is packaged makes a world of difference. I've got a lot of love for completing the Persona Compendium with every demon combination, but dipping in and out of more complex recipes to look for a certain skill or creature wears on me.

It's not entirely fair, but it's hard not to compare *P3P*'s demon recipes to its modern successors here. While the fifth game simplified things like the three-way fusion and paced its options, *Portable* dumps a list on the table and lets me piece them all together in a complex game of Guess Who. There were times I took more care, searching diligently for the creatures I needed, but I often performed the equivalent of opening up my fridge at night and grabbing a fistful of shredded cheese. I have no idea if this meets my nutritional needs, but I can't be bothered to cook much else.

> **It's hard not to compare *P3P*'s demon recipes to its modern successors**

This combat feels like a rough draft for later *Personas*, but I still appreciate the turn-based combos present throughout the series. You'll encounter roaming Shadows, try to strike them first to begin the encounter, then analyse and exploit their elemental weakness. Even after all these years, I still haven't learned my lesson and occasionally try to brute-force my way through.

Shadows punish that behaviour even on normal difficulty, wiping my party if I don't apply thoughtful strategies. Depending on how long I've spent climbing Tartarus for the night, I'll either rave about how tight and satisfying the whole process is or bemoan how it drags.

DRAG-AND-CLICK

Portable's pivot from a 3D overworld to a 2D environment remains one of its more contentious choices, but in retrospect, you're stuck navigating the same handful of teensy 'open' maps for damn near 70 hours. I'll take the accelerated point-and-click movement. I say point-and-click, but that's not entirely accurate, either. It's more drag-and-click, which can be as tedious as it sounds without customising the controls. Instead of hovering over a target and left-clicking, imagine your mouse emulating an analogue stick. On the world map, the PSP-era cursor must slide from point a to point b to make a selection. You can accelerate the movement speed, and simple double-clicking seemed to work when there wasn't much distance for the cursor to travel. It was a bit finicky, but if you set a keybind to make the movement faster, it's not bad. I recommend plugging in a controller or using the Steam Deck.

The PC version's configuration options offer plenty of remappable schemes and other settings that consistently played nice with my setup. On my desktop, playing full-screen at 3840x2160, 120 FPS, with the rest of *Persona 3 Portable*'s settings cranked up to high didn't cause any issues.

For the most part, *Portable* looks great, but some environments and models fared better than others in the remaster treatment. Backgrounds with more lighting effects suffer the most, adding messy layers of grain to the art. It's nothing catastrophic, and the upscaled makeover remains a significant improvement.

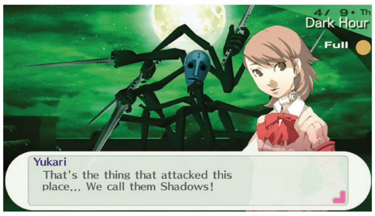
THE END WILL COME

It's a relief to revisit *Persona 3 Portable* through its PC port and realise my fascination with the world isn't just childhood sentiment. A keen sense of sadness and dread sets in the further you go. The otherworldly discontent bleeds through everywhere in the best ways, whether in the tick of the Dark Hour or in the passing conversations with restless classmates. *Portable* may not be at the top of its class for its old systems and dungeon crawling, but its cast and tone easily compensate for some of its shortcomings. Forgive *Persona 3* for a little monotony, and it'll deliver on the horrors of inevitability steeped in a style distinctly different from the games that followed. ■

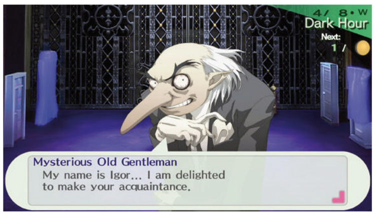
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A PSP classic with systems that show age, but *P3P*'s retelling remains a series best for its stylishly eerie world.

80

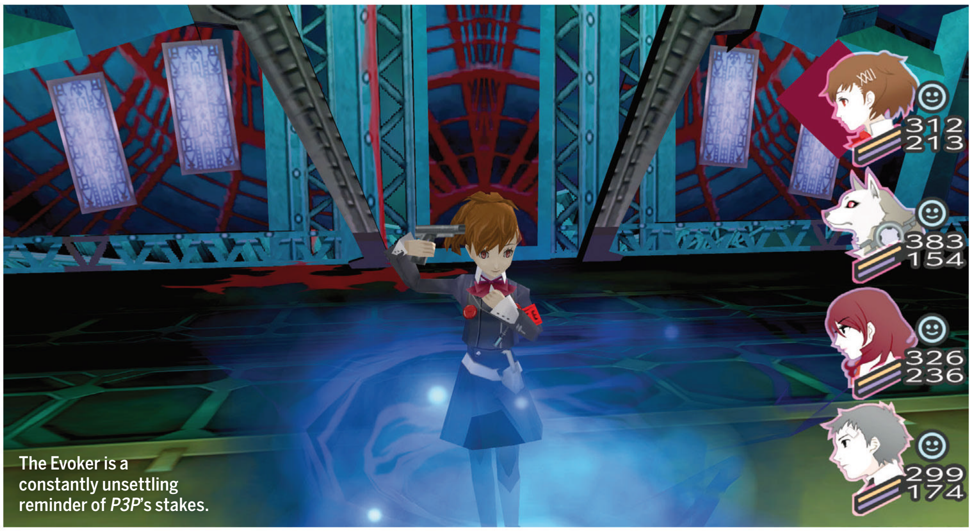


Yukari
That's the thing that attacked this place... We call them Shadows!



Mysterious Old Gentleman
My name is Igor... I am delighted to make your acquaintance.

TOP: There was an animated cutscene here. It's gone now.



The Evoker is a constantly unsettling reminder of *P3P*'s stakes.

SAMURAI SNACK

MAHOKENSHI is a light deckbuilder in strategy-RPG clothes

By Jody Macgregor

Mahokenshi is basically _Slay the Spire_ with samurai wizards, and that's a solid selling point right there. It's a deckbuilder, the kind of game where you start with a set of rubbish cards and accumulate better ones as you work towards your goal, but one that tweaks the genre conventions in some unusual ways. Plus, you get a katana.

The theme turns out to be the least impactful part of *Mahokenshi*, a thin layer of second-hand Japanese folklore on top of the familiar elements. The mahokenshi are mystic warriors who've made deals with divine spirits for power, and there are four to unlock, each with their own deck. The one who cut a deal with a spider gets cards with poison and stealth effects, while the one whose powers come via a turtle spirit gets defense boosts and damaging spikes. In between fighting goblins, bandits and cultists, these four face the occasional oni, while the item that lets them ditch useless cards is a kimono for some reason.

The structure is what really differentiates *Mahokenshi* from other deckbuilders. You play on a hexgrid, spending action points to manoeuvre your samurai across the floating Celestial Islands to find treasure, quests, power-ups and so on. Instead of a randomised Spire or the mix-and-match Hell of *Monster Train*, all of its 18 missions have pre-determined layouts and goals, each telling a little story. One began with a tense chase, four feral oni pursuing me through the forest towards a castle. That affected the deck decisions I made, making movement cards more valuable, and altered the way I played.

> **The structure is what really differentiates it from other deckbuilders**

In other deckbuilders you just want to find an overpowered combo, then delete every card from your deck that doesn't help you pull off that combo. The missions in *Mahokenshi*, whether protecting villagers or sealing portals, add an extra layer of things to consider beyond finding the most outrageously broken set of cards to pair.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Part card game, part strategy game, part postcard from Japanese myth

EXPECT TO PAY
$36.50

DEVELOPER
Game Source Studio

PUBLISHER
Iceberg Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, RTX 3080

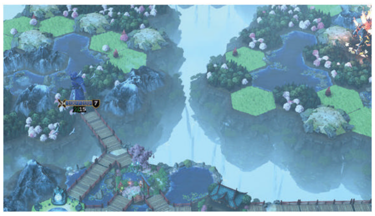
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
mahokenshi.com

SHOGUN AND TELL

Another difference is that *Mahokenshi* is much easier. Only one mission gave me trouble, and that turned out to be my own fault. What seemed like a race against time, with four cultists casting buffs on an Oni King in the centre of the map, was actually much simpler. I should have been following the turtle spirit way of slow and steady instead of rushing in.

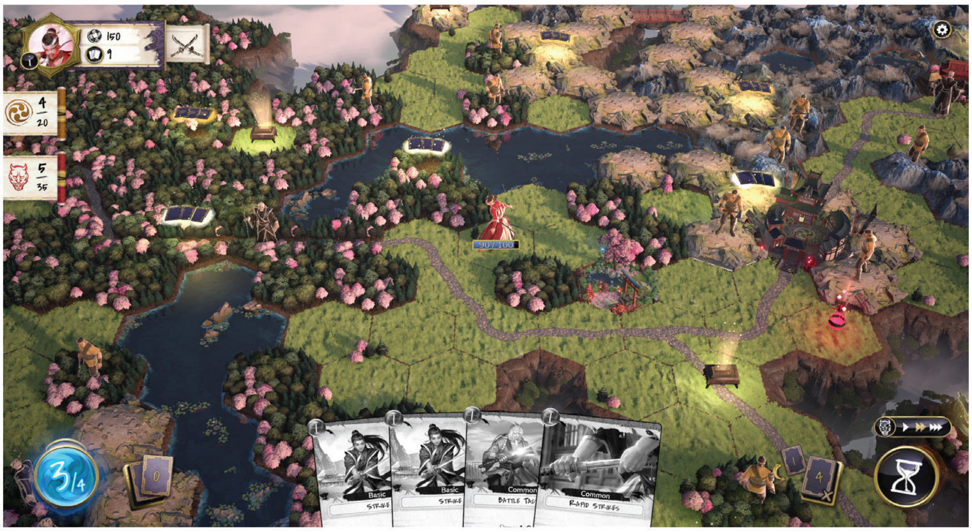
Since the Oni King doesn't attack until you kill all four cultists, or mess up and stand on a hex that's too close to him, the best approach was to murder three of the hooded jerks then explore every corner of the map for power-up altars, markets to buy cards, dojos to upgrade cards, and gold to pay for the buying and upgrading. He didn't stand a chance even though he'd been getting hulked-up on magic steroids at the same time. Even when a mission has an explicit time limit, in *Mahokenshi* it's always best to spend as long as possible gathering your strength.

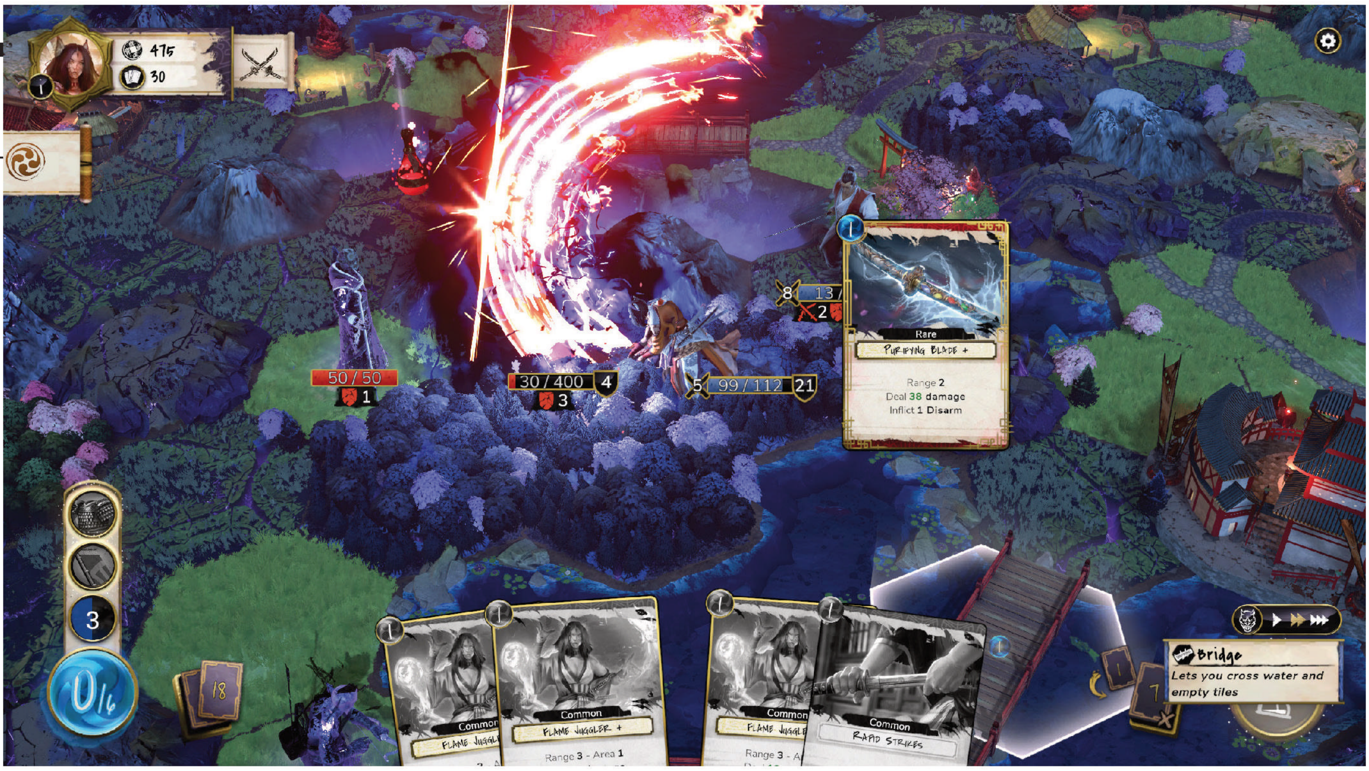


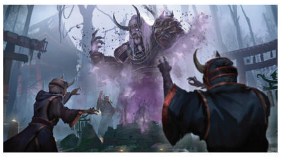
New cards have been added to your collection

TOP: Who builds these bridges anyway?

RIGHT: Two paths diverged in a wood, and I chose the one that gave more buffs.







TOP: Any downsides to reforging a cursed sword? Nope.

ABOVE: It starts with a kitty-ear headset, soon you're a furry.

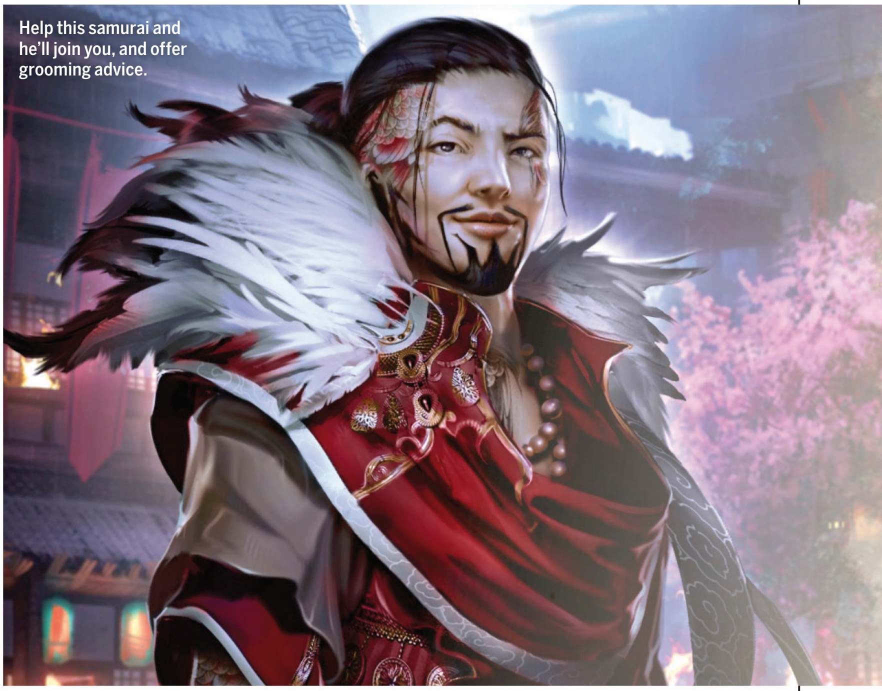
The mahokenshi earn xp and level up individually, which does encourage you to stick with one character. That said, you'll hit max level fast and every story mission you unlock is accompanied by a side mission or two that's even easier and can probably be tackled with the level one fox-powered lady you just unlocked. Plus there are buffs you pay for with crystals earned for completing optional challenges, like meditating at every altar on a map, or winning before three of the peasants you're supposed to protect die, that apply to every character.

While I was playing *Mahokenshi* I had a decent time, but I can't imagine I'll ever think of it again. It's a modest game, one I made it through in 20-ish hours and didn't really dwell on between sessions. The backstory barely exists, with a magic sword that needs to be reforged, evil cultists who plan to open portals to the Underworld, and basically nothing you couldn't rinse off and replace with a completely different cast. Combined with the breezy lack of challenge, it's about as filling as a single Pocky stick. For those 20 hours it did compel me, though. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

If you found Slay the Spire's oppressiveness off-putting, Mahokenshi's easier and dressed up in a pretty kimono.

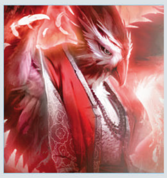
69



Help this samurai and he'll join you, and offer grooming advice.

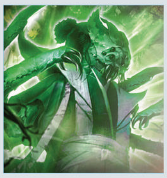
YOUR POTENTIAL FURSONAS

The game calls them Kami, but we know what they really are



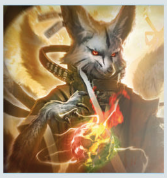
TENGU

The ghosts of arrogant people and sinful priests become bird-monk things. Tengu kidnap people who return after being force-fed animal excrement.



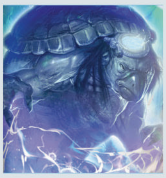
OGUMO

Giant spiders, sometimes with the body of a tiger. One was defeated by the Yorimitsu after it tried to trick him by taking the shape of a beautiful woman.



KITSUNE

Shapeshifting tricksters who look like foxes with nine tails, but also like to take the form of beautiful women. I'm noticing a bit of a theme here.



KAPPA

Wannabe Squirtles with two favourite foods: cucumbers, and human entrails. Though playful, they can become violent. Fortunately, they're easy to defeat.

OUT OF TUNE

POWER CHORD'S lame metalhead aesthetic cheapens a cool card game

By Noah Smith

Mid-pandemic, I was subleasing the corner of a jam space to practise drums. The unit behind mine belonged to an ageing speed metal band, who never played in-time for more than half an hour. When the lead guitarist took a break from arguing with his girlfriend on the balcony, he would pass me in the halls, begging for cocaine while playing Motörhead on his phone speakers. *Power Chord* is a lot like that band.

Power Chord's deck-based combat centres on its lineup, with each band member offering a distinct way of dealing or negating double-digit damage numbers. In spite of his eye-rolling name, I really latched onto Grimnir Brawlfist, a lead guitarist who throws out deadly riffs based on how much rage he accumulates from taking damage himself, which can be helpfully negated by the drummer's slew of barrier and armour abilities. The vocalist and bassist positions fill support and healer niches, respectively, giving the band a healthy variety.

The interplay between cards is where *Power Chord* gets interesting, with the best having a challenge or secondary ability. Sunder deals seven damage, a strong finisher, but it applies free barriers to allies if you use it to break through an enemy shield. Most critical to my success were Grimnir's cards, where rage stacks can be augmented with a stance card that generates more rage at the cost of taking on greater damage. *Power Chord* limits you to a couple of cards each turn, a constraint that shines when it feels like you and your foes are playing two turns ahead of each other. I just wish it was clearer what was happening on my turn.

It's difficult to discern where damage is coming from

Power Chord's underlying mechanisms may seem familiar if you've poured weeks into the likes of *Slay the Spire* or *Monster Train*, but without a degree in deckbuilders I was often overwhelmed by poorly communicated stacks and debuffs. It's difficult to discern where damage is coming from.

A lot of this comes down to the lack of enemy variety. With only four distinct silhouettes between them, I found myself barely able to parse the enemy roster, and I was often left scratching my head wondering how and why I was taking such massive bursts of damage.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Rogue-lite Heavy Metal Deck-Builder

EXPECT TO PAY
$29.50

DEVELOPER
Big Blue Bubble

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5700G, 16GB Ram, Radeon RX 5700

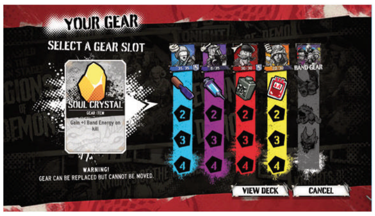
MULTIPLAYER
No

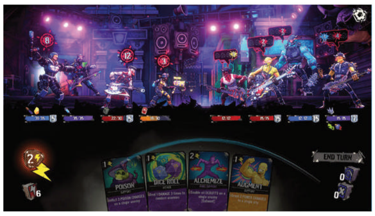
LINK
bit.ly/3YiuAGF

THREE NOTES

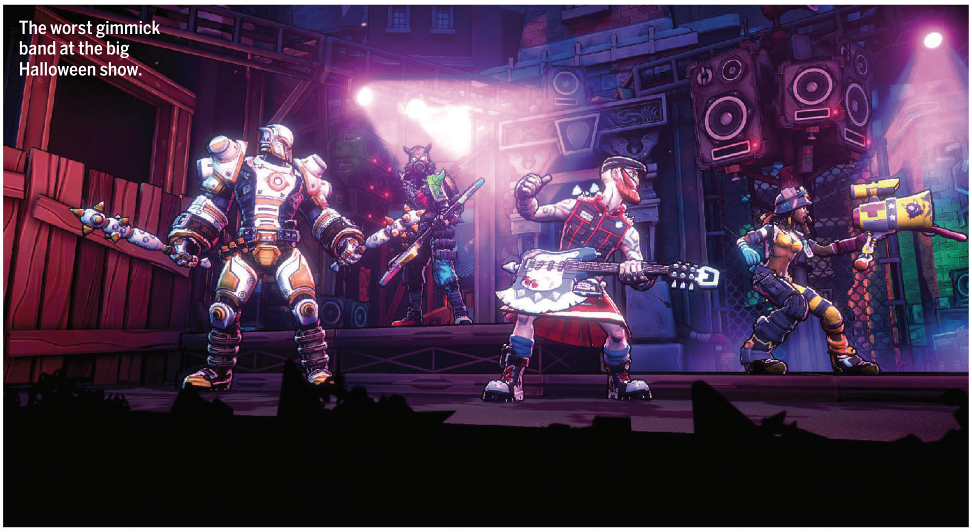
One of *Power Chord*'s missed notes is in its theme, with musical stylings that are frustratingly skin deep, arrhythmic 'I go you go' turn-based card-slinging over the top of some bargain bin punk/metal/sludge instrumentals. It's a barebones affair that I doubt is going to win over anybody that's sincerely into metal music, with battles only ever occurring on a single, unchanging concert stage.

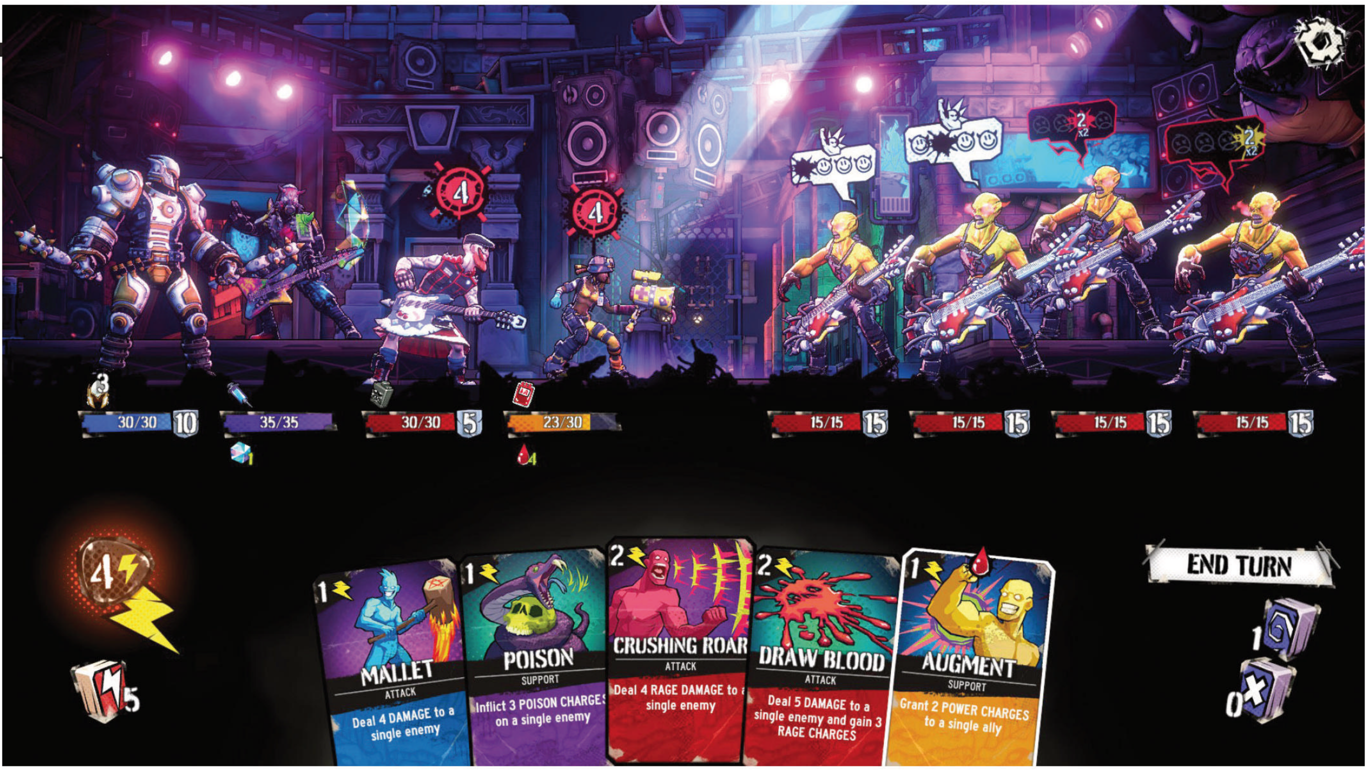
I wasn't totally sold on any of the bandmates I was saddled with, either. Too many are derivative amalgamations of album art tropes that spend a lot more time attacking than playing music. The drummer, the sole Knight of the Thunderfirst

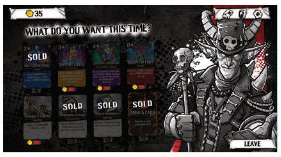




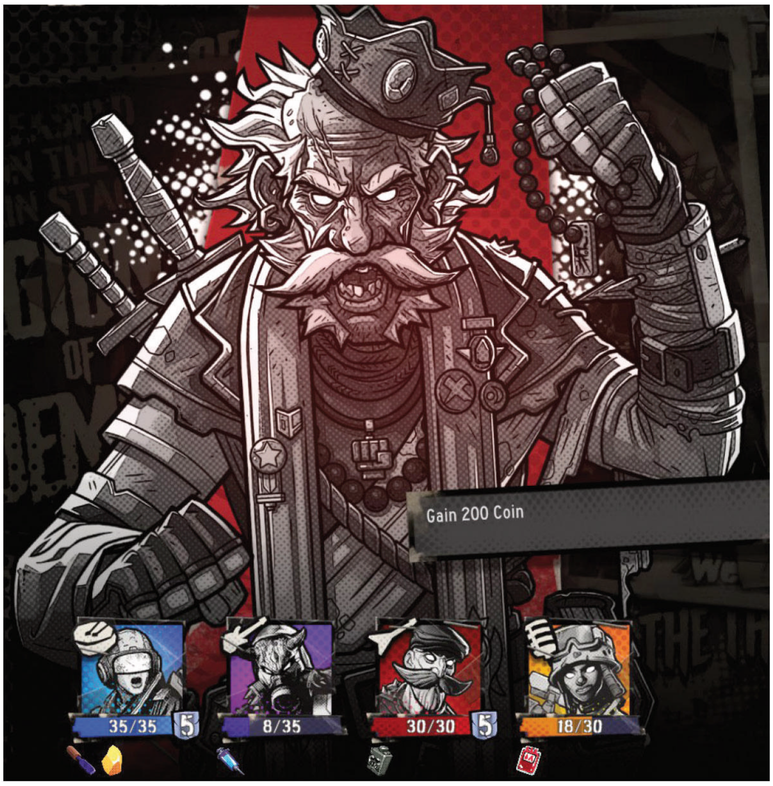
TOP: Gear takes the form of magically infused Hot Topic merch.


The worst gimmick band at the big Halloween show.


30/30
35/35
30/30
23/30
15/15
15/15
15/15
15/15
MALLET
ATTACK
Deal 4 DAMAGE to a single enemy
POISON
SUPPORT
Inflict 3 POISON CHARGES on a single enemy
CRUSHING ROAR
ATTACK
Deal 4 RAGE DAMAGE to a single enemy
DRAW BLOOD
ATTACK
Deal 5 DAMAGE to a single enemy and gain 3 RAGE CHARGES
AUGMENT
SUPPORT
Grant 2 POWER CHARGES to a single ally
END TURN


WHAT DO YOU WANT THIS TIME?
SOLD
SOLD
SOLD
SOLD
LEAVE

CHOOSE A REWARD
CONTINUE


Gain 200 Coin
35/35
8/35
30/30
18/30

TOP: Enemy variety isn't *Power Chord*'s strong suit.

FAR RIGHT: One of *Power Chord*'s many trustworthy faces.

(ugh) looks like a 40K Space Marine with two giant clubs. None of his attack animations ever line up with what's on the cards. Metal is a deeply rich genre, and hard as hell to play, but *Power Chord* is permeated with a pervasive sense of 'missed opportunity' – it just feels cheap to fall back on the aesthetic that Metalocalypse was mocking in 2006.

Power Chord's card battles are strung together by a roguelite progression system, a simple dotted map with random encounters between pit stops to heal or gear up. Due to the lack of visual clarity on where damage is coming from in the midst of a battle, I never found myself weighing the risk and reward of these route options, with it often making the most strategic sense to beeline towards healing stations.

Power Chord has a sturdy enough skeleton let down by an anaemic commitment to the bit. It never fully embraces the genre it's pulling from in a meaningful or sincere way, only ever using it as cheap theming. Coupled with battles that swing between satisfying and incomprehensible, *Power Chord* is out of time and out of tune. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Power Chord's slick card-slinging combat is weighed down by its gaudy aesthetic and a lack of variety.

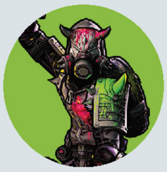
50

MIX TAPE MADNESS

Power Chord's Musicians and their favourite music

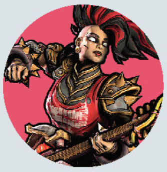
GRIMNIR BRAWLFIST

Dad-metal, thrash and Ulver (before they got good).



SHINOBI 13

Machine Girl, The Stalin, Chat Pile. Always sending you Bandcamp links.



EMBER

Really into speed metal covers of anime and game soundtracks.

CRASHNSNARE

Mumbling about something called 'Ogre-core'. Secret Carly Rae Jepsen fan.

SWIMCITY

Create and manage an undersea metropolis in city builder AQUATICO

By Christopher Livingston

Imagine looking out over the skyline of a bustling city and instead of seeing a flock of birds or a passenger jet, you see a pod of dolphins or a gliding submarine. This is *Aquatico*, where you're building a city on the ocean floor after an asteroid strike has rendered the surface world uninhabitable. Instead of roads, you'll build pipelines, instead of city buses you'll have submarines, and instead of tornadoes you'll have to worry about shark attacks.

Despite *Aquatico*'s unusual setting, your city will grow and prosper based on many of the same elements found in city builders that take place on the surface. Mining for oil and stone, fabricating plastic and glass, farming for sustenance, and using turbines and solar collectors for power. Resource management is the real star of *Aquatico*, and there's loads of it to manage. Swift expansion needs to be tempered with the infrastructure to support it: build too quickly and red exclamation points will appear around the city signifying a deficit of fuel or oxygen. I found it a mostly relaxing experience to build in the bubbly blue depths, but it's livened up by moments of alarm and panic when I didn't plan ahead.

The growing city can also be highly enjoyable to just sit back and watch for a bit. Human workers clomp across the seabed in mech-like diving suits, aquatic drones speed through the water, grow and harvest crops, and carry supplies in their little mechanical claws. Automated submarines move resources between depots, warehouses, and the city centre while all sorts of sea life glides over and through the city, from clouds of giant jellyfish to massive sperm whales.

> **The city can also be highly enjoyable to just sit back and watch**

NAUTICAL TRIAL

Another bright point is an expedition system a bit similar to *Frostpunk*'s. After building a special hub, I can stock a submarine with human explorers and supplies and send it offscreen to investigate SOS signals, abandoned colonies, or new sources of food and resources. The missions provide the slimmest strands of narrative threads, usually boiling down to a single choice (fight a pirate sub or try to be friendly?) but it's nice to feel like my city is just one of many different undersea colonies.

But I do have a beef with one of *Aquatico*'s systems in particular: the research tech tree. Rather than being laid out in a logical tier list everything is combined into a single big, incredibly long scrollable menu. It's difficult to find where certain unlocks are on the massive tech tree, and they aren't always sensibly located. I needed to unlock a policy that taxes engineers before I could build more advanced farms, and I had to research jewellery stores and defence platforms before I could build the most basic fast food restaurant. The result of this badly organised system is often having to burn through weeks of tech research at 8x speed – and spend a small fortune in cash to do it – just to reach the item I want to unlock because it's buried behind unrelated technology or policies.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An undersea city builder with a heavy focus on resource management

EXPECT TO PAY
$30.50

DEVELOPER
Digital Reef Games

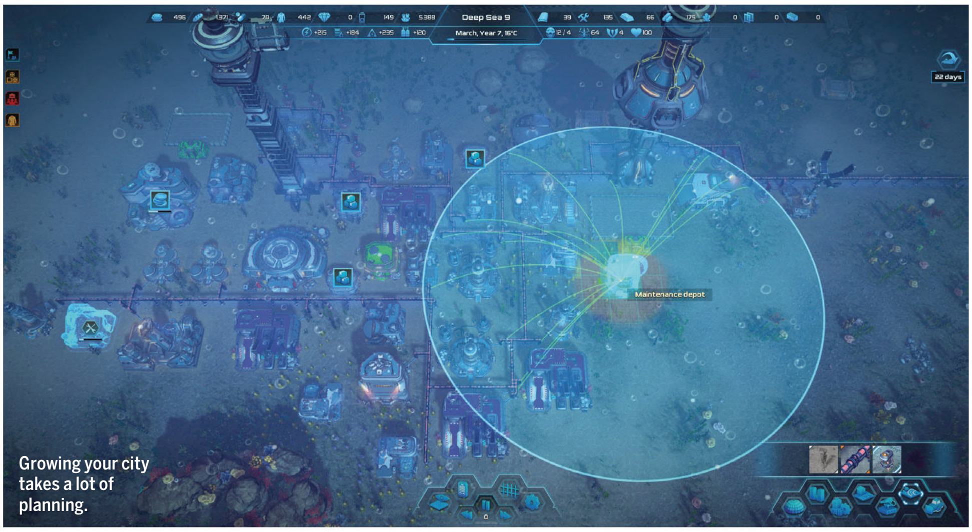
PUBLISHER
Overseer Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2080

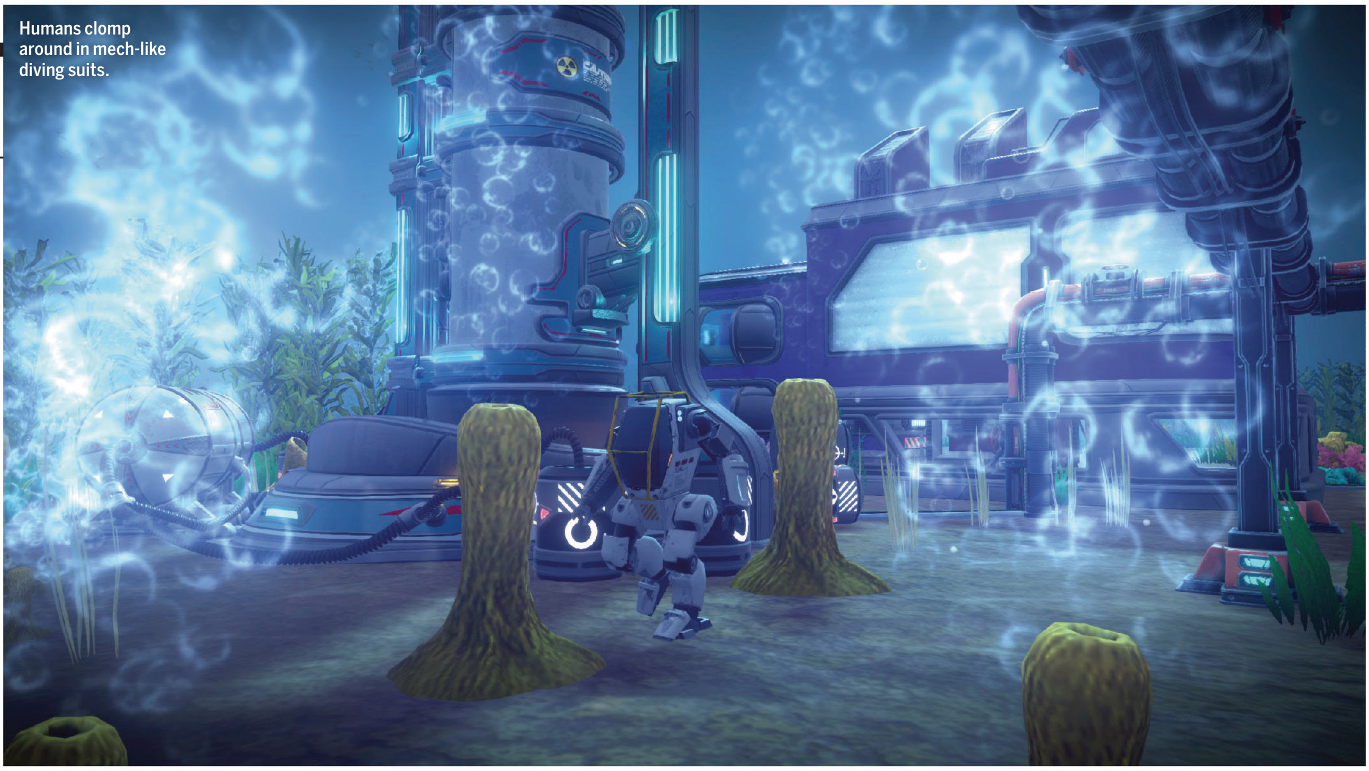
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
overseer-games.com/aquatico

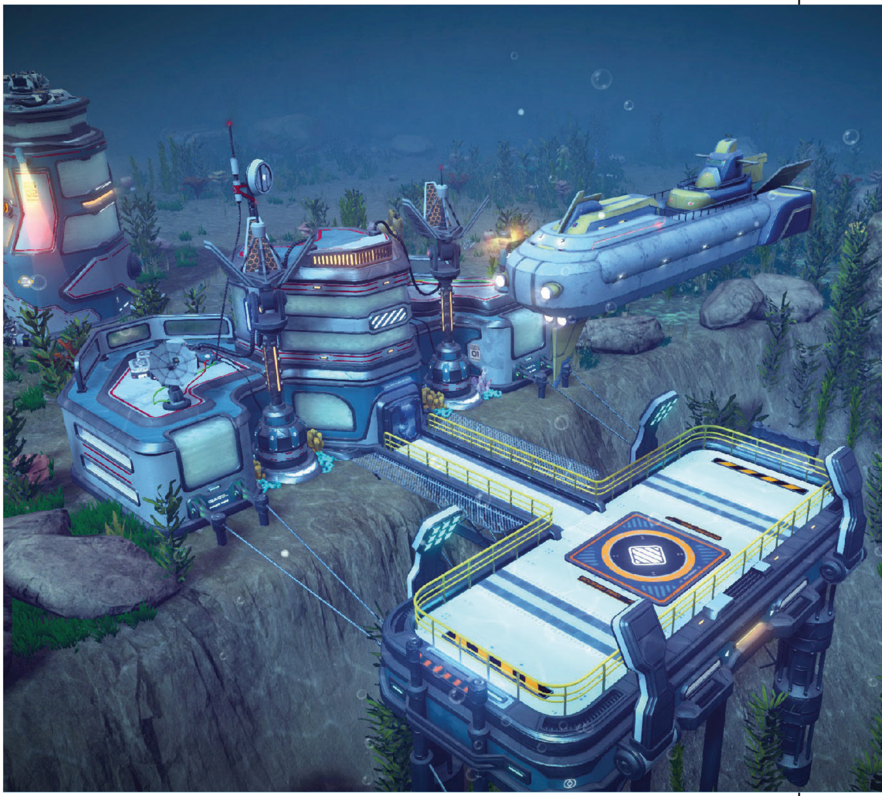
ABOVE: Homes, shops and schools are kept safe under domes.



Growing your city takes a lot of planning.



Humans clomp around in mech-like diving suits.



ABOVE: What keeps sharks at bay? Double-barrelled laser cannons.

FAR RIGHT: Build an expedition hub to explore the cold, dark abyss.

There's another issue with *Aquatico* that's a little harder to put my finger on, but after hours of play I've built a city that, unfortunately, never really feels like a city. It feels like a big network of factories connected by pipes. Part of it is that the footprint of nearly every factory and building is a perfect square, so my city wound up looking like a big flat grid, which stops it from developing a real personality as a place. The human settlers are so separate from everything else, with neighbourhoods confined to square domes above the city instead of more organically integrated among industrial areas and farms. And straight pipelines with 90-degree bends just aren't as enjoyable to build as winding roads and bridges. My city is pretty grand, but I never developed any real fondness for it.

The resource management systems of *Aquatico* are pretty deep, and there are a lot of charming details and some inventive ideas in the undersea builder. But like the water it's submerged in, my city wound up feeling cold. It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't really want to live there. ■

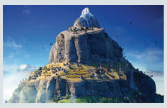
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The resource management is deep and satisfying, but the city itself never quite feels like a city.

68

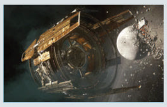
CONSTRUCTION JUNCTION

The ocean isn't the only strange place to build a city



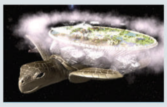
LAYSARA: SUMMIT KINGDOM

Build cities along the steep cliffs of a mountain while dodging avalanches.



IXION

A space station is a dangerous place to build a city, especially since the moon has been destroyed.



WORLD TURTLES

Manage a civilisation on the back of a giant turtle while it swims through outer space in this upcoming city builder.

NECROCITY

The undead need a place to live too. Build a graveyard for ghouls and vampires and defend it from the living.

AW CHEESE

PIZZA TOWER is a non-stop, absurd, and wonderful slice of speedrunning action

By Scott McCrae

Nintendo classics have always been ripe pickings for indie reimaginings. Series like *Mario* and *Zelda* have directly inspired greats like *Shovel Knight* and *Tunic*, and you can't walk five-feet without stepping into a new Metroidvania. But I've often pondered, where were the *Wario Land* revivals? Its mix of high-speed platforming, exploration and anarchic, slapstick energy made for some of the Game Boy's crown jewels.

Well, looks like I wasn't the only one to have that thought – in the last few years, we've suddenly had an influx of *Wario*-likes, from the breakout-inspired *Antonball Deluxe* and its upcoming sequel *Anton Blast*, to a *Doom* mod called *Treasure Tech*. *Pizza Tower* was announced right at the start of the trend, in 2018, and now it's finally here. Turns out it was worth the wait.

We join ageing pizza chef Peppino Spaghetti as he's sitting in his pizzeria, worrying about making enough to keep the lights on. Suddenly, he's paid a visit by the nefarious Pizza Face – who is, of course, a giant floating pizza with a face. Pizza Face informs him that his home – the titular Pizza Tower – will soon shoot a giant laser at the pizzeria, destroying it instantly. And so begins Peppino's high-speed quest to climb the tower and stop his cheesy nemesis.

As you can probably tell, the game revels in the absurd. On top of the obvious *Wario Land* inspiration, it also blends in the vibes of off-beat '90s cartoons like Ren & Stimpy, for a potently wacky mix.

Peppino himself is a joy to control. He may be a timid and anxious little chef, but he plays like an army tank with a Ferrari engine. He has a grab attack, a dash, a super jump and a dedicated taunt button which doubles as a parry – a Swiss-army knife of satisfying platformer tools. And even when he's at a full, manic sprint, the game is incredibly tight and responsive. It feels poised to be the next great speedrunning game, at its best evoking the glory days of *Sonic the Hedgehog*.

WAR-IO AND PEACE-ZA

Outside of boss fights, Peppino is invincible, with hits instead only taking away from your overall score – an idea that's complemented by a *Devil May Cry*-esque combo system. This also plays into the game's creatively grim power-ups, which submit him to all sorts of punishment – including being set on fire, turned into a cheese monster, or flattened into a sentient pizza box. He suffers for his delicious art, but it never slows him down.

Each of the game's 19 levels has its own wild gimmick

Each of the game's 19 levels has its own wild gimmick, from a chicken who sits in Peppino's hat granting him extra manoeuvrability with its wings, to a claw that grabs him and swings him around by his overalls. It's impressive that, with how much variety there is to discover, it really never stumbles, and it speaks to the versatility of Peppino's moveset that he fits so seamlessly into so many different scenarios.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A platformer inspired by *Wario Land* and '90s cartoons

EXPECT TO PAY
$29.50

DEVELOPER
Tour De Pizza

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Steam Deck

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3kWehkw

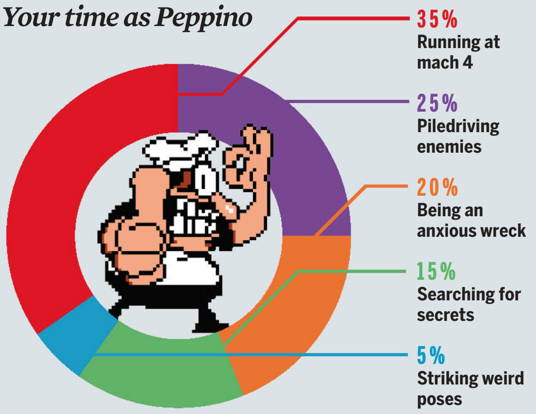
The game's bosses are equally as inventive. You'll face challenges like a gun duel with a sentient cheese cowboy, or a brawl with Peppino's arch-rival, The Noise, a mischievous gremlin who may or may not be based on a certain '80s pizza mascot. I won't spoil it here, but the final boss and subsequent finale of the game are both incredible, and match the likes of *Bayonetta* for sheer spectacle.

Throughout the whole of the game, the vibrant pixel art invests every enemy, item and background with twitchy, madcap personality. Peppino himself never speaks, and yet he feels like a rich, full character purely on the strength of his animations. Each level's title card takes that art style in a new direction – from a Terminator pastiche, to a homage to *Castlevania*. It's all a joy to behold, and it's genuinely funny, bursting with visual gags that had me cackling out loud more than anything I've played in years.

Pizza Tower is an unashamed ode to *Wario Land* – but in my eyes it has eclipsed it. Before, I was eagerly awaiting a new entry in Nintendo's series, but now I'm not too fussed, because it's hard to imagine it being as inventive and exciting as this imitator. It takes what made that series so great, and expands on it tenfold. The result is one of the best and most satisfying platformers out there today. To put it simply: you knead to play it. ■

A QUICK SLICE

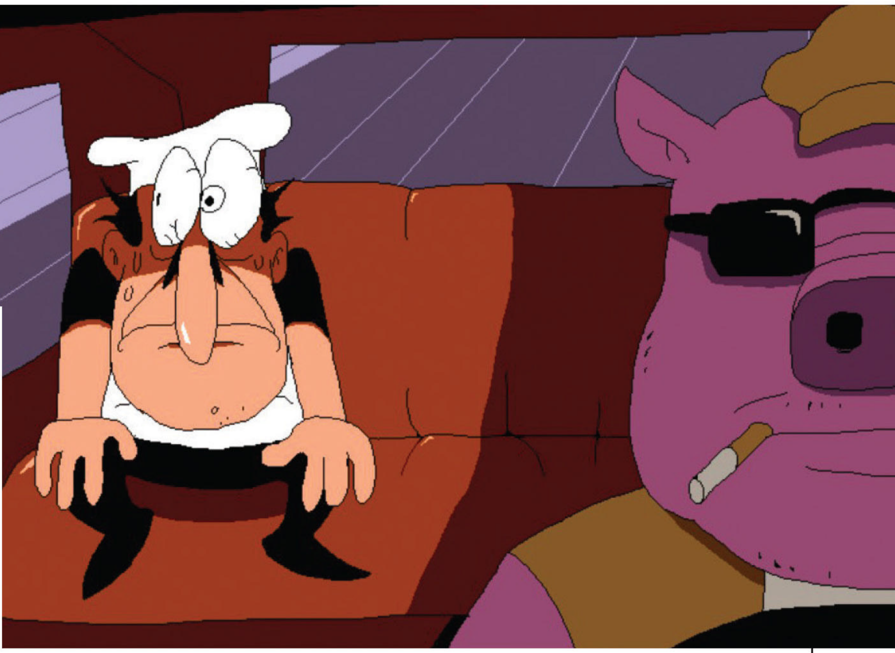
Your time as Peppino



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

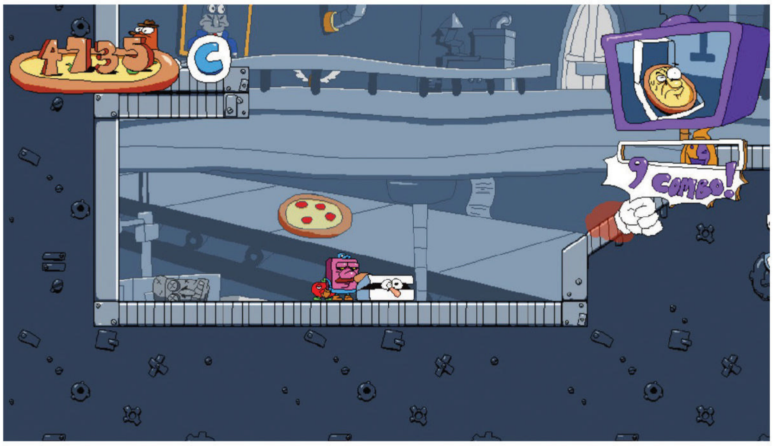
A creative platformer that doesn't just do right by its inspiration *Wario Land*, but actually surpasses it.

90



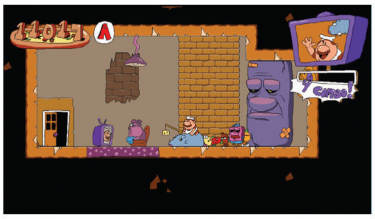
A perfect depiction of the average taxi experience.

Garish Cook
Unlocked by taunting 50 times
TOTAL
$50



4735
C
9 COMBO!

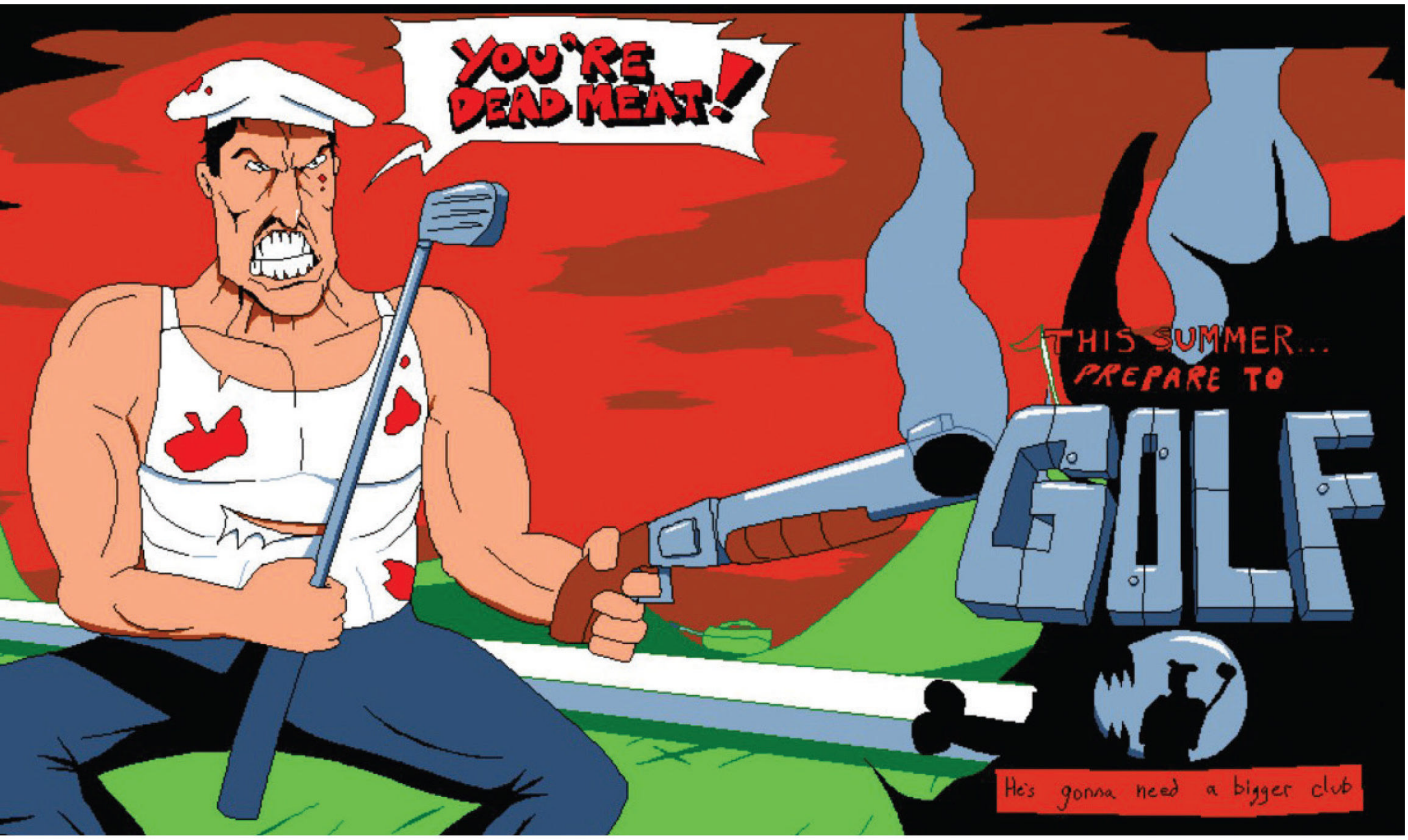
Prepare to draw



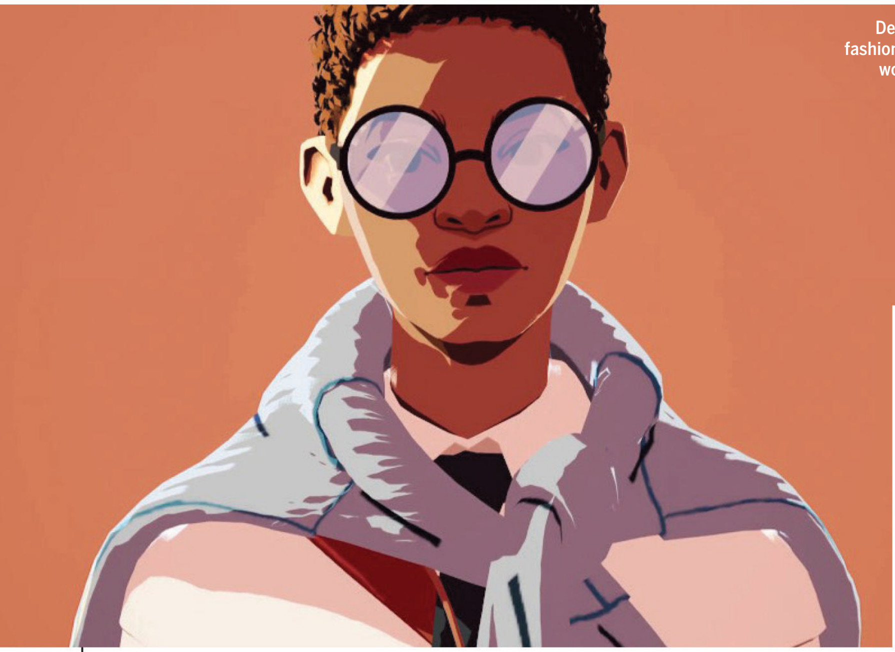
FAR LEFT: Peppino loves pizza so much he can even cosplay as one.

LEFT: The good, the bad, and the tasty.

BELOW: Each level's title card uses a wildly different art style.



YOU'RE DEAD MEAT!
THIS SUMMER...
PREPARE TO
GOLF
He's gonna need a bigger club

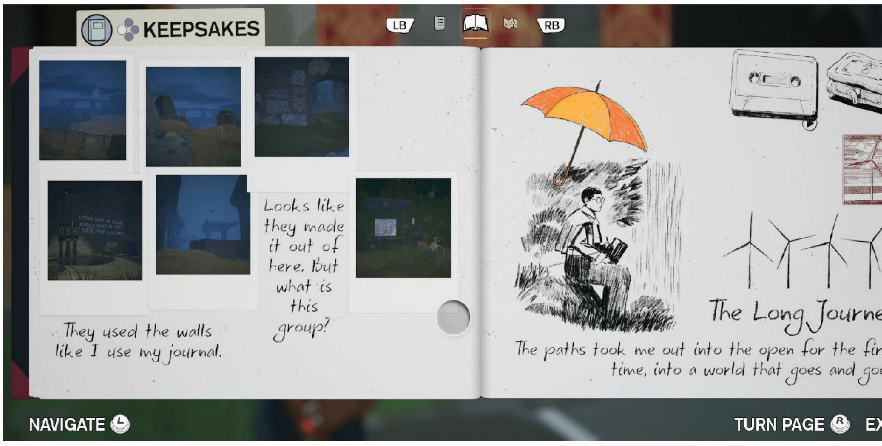


Despite their impeccable fashion, the narrator's charm wore thin over the game.

RIGHT: Few NPCs left an impression but the voice acting is good throughout the game.

FAR RIGHT: Putting together a journal will be your pride and joy.

What are you doing here?


KEEPSAKES
LB
RB
NAVIGATE
TURN PAGE
EX

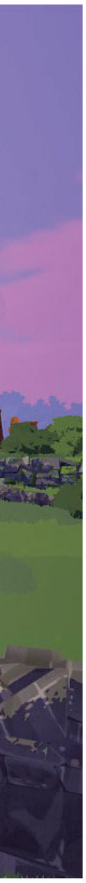
Looks like they made it out of here. But what is this group?

They used the walls like I use my journal.

The Long Journe

The paths took me out into the open for the fir time, into a world that goes and go

Every hill holds the promise of something wonderful over the rise.



OVERSEASONED

Narration disturbs tranquillity in SEASON: A LETTER TO THE FUTURE

By Samantha Greer

There's nothing I love more than a game whose world wants to tell me a story. As soon as you present me with an evocative landscape I can't wait to get stuck in. *Season: A Letter to the Future* has a vast horizon when it starts. Yet the more you travel through *Season*, the more its vista shrinks, taken up by the story its narrator wants to tell, leaving no room for the player's own exploration.

The starting promise is a tantalising one. It begins with a character, at some point in the future, opening the journal our narrating protagonist is about to embark on writing. This unnamed protagonist has been raised in an isolated mountain village and wants to journey out into the world to document the world's current 'season', an era, before the next one comes along.

The world you explore is littered with remnants of the past. It bears the hallmarks of post-apocalyptic fiction, but people continue to live and flourish. Yet you are trying to decipher the past, to capture cultures gone or fading. Whether that's graffiti or religious shrines, you are trying to provide a thorough snapshot of a place and time. To do this you have three main tools. A camera, an audio recorder, and the aforementioned journal.

The bulk of the game takes place in a large valley which you can openly explore, on foot or on your little dinky bicycle, visiting its key points in any order. Every time you are set loose over a hill or down a slope, my heart swells with the excitement of what's to come as I glimpse distant statues or the rising smoke of a hidden cottage. Everywhere you visit has a lovely handcrafted quality about it. Each locale is convincingly lived in with dozens of little props and a sense of their day to day life, whether it's a rural farm or an artist's junk yard.

Except my every attempt to connect with the world, to let it enter my imagination and take on a life of its own, is interrupted by a narrator who, frankly, just will not shut up.

WINTER OF DISCONTENT

Season is a bit too ponderous for its own good, reluctant to let the audience have a thought for themselves before the narrator can offer theirs. It feels like it wants to take its audience on a meditative journey, and so much of the aesthetic and audio, focused on gentle ambience, seem centred around this idea. However, it never quite leaves enough room in its story for us to breathe. I couldn't help but think about the allegations, reported by GameIndustry.Biz, of sexual and verbal harassment regarding the game's former creative director Simon Darveau, who remains at Scavengers Studio. A dark cloud hangs over the whole game.

> **The world you explore is littered with remnants of the past**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A narrative adventure game

EXPECT TO PAY
$36.50

DEVELOPER
Scavengers Studio

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-4790K, 16GB RAM, GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
play-season.com

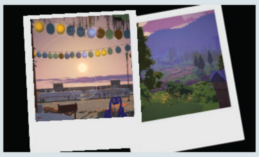
Having a lot of words doesn't have to be a problem, it's just that *Season* is quite one-note. Unlike *Sable* or *Lake*, *Season* is humourless in its dialogue and not very playful in its exploration. It means that being over-encumbered with dialogue really starts to drag things down. Its melancholy tone is potent but without any respite of joy or warmth, it starts to feel like a parody of itself. The kind of game you might make if you wanted to mock the earnest sensibilities of 'walking simulators' or the like.

Despite its constraints, I took great care over the little journal I was curating. You get to choose what goes in and where, from pictures and audio samples, to sketches and knick-knacks found along the way. I fixated on the layouts, trying to be thorough without just cramming in everything. By the end of the game I was so proud of the book I'd put together, in spite of so much of the content being robbed of all mystique. Even when a bug wiped all my save data several hours into the game (an issue that has since been resolved) I still painstakingly put together that journal a second time.

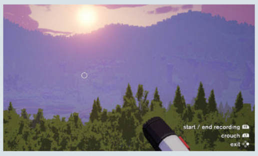
While its overbearing narrator robs *Season* of the wonder and meditation it so clearly aspires to, I still managed to find a little of my own. I just wish its letter to the future was one I got write, rather than one I only got to carry. ■

DEAR DIARY...

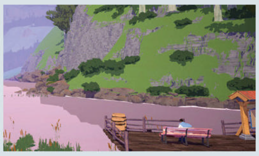
The steps of putting together a journal



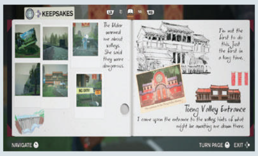
1 PHOTOGRAPHS The main way you'll uncover the world and document it. Each pic will unlock commentary too.



2 AUDIO You'll need to capture sounds of instruments and animals to give a sense of where you visit.



3 SKETCHING Finally, you'll find spots throughout the world where you can sit, relax and draw a scene.

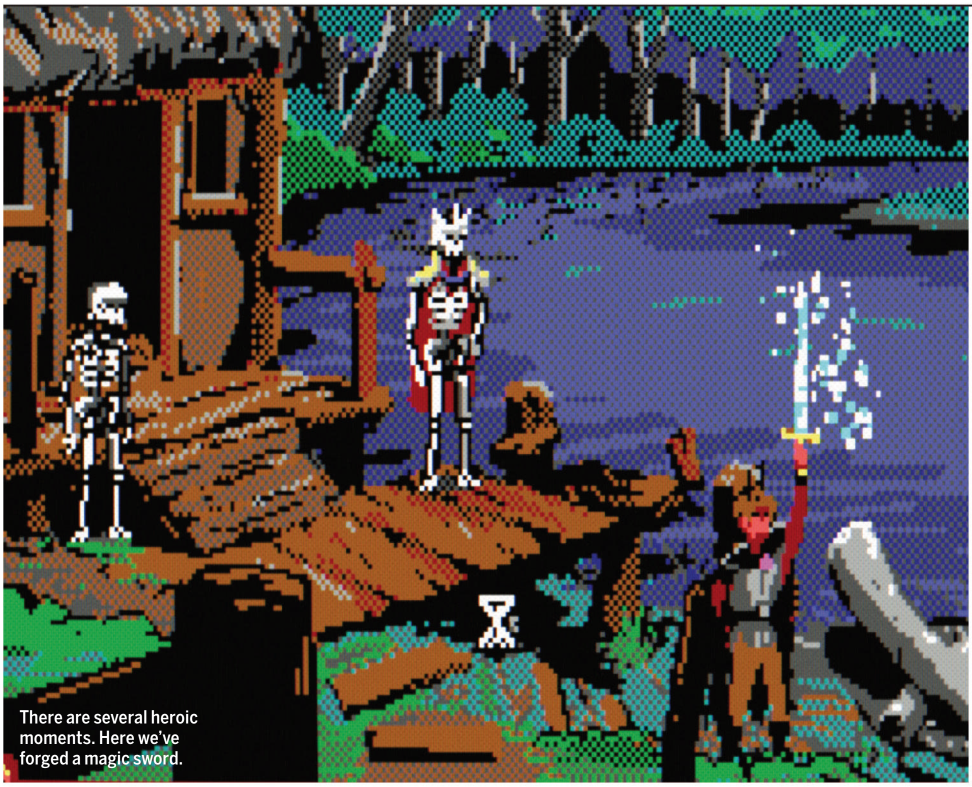


4 JOURNAL Then you can decide how to lay it all out in your journal, giving each page your own touch.

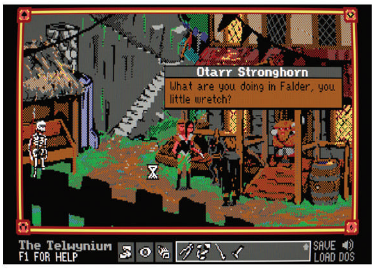
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Season: A Letter To The Future's gorgeous world is unfortunately denied a proper chance to tell its own tale.

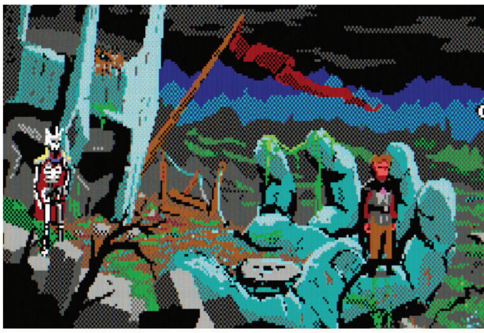
69



There are several heroic moments. Here we've forged a magic sword.



Otarr Stronghorn
What are you doing in Falder, you little wretch?



TEL TALE

THE TELWYNIUM: BOOK TWO is another memorable Powerhoof game

Though a videogame adaptation of The Wheel of Time exists, we're unlikely to ever get the epic RPG that the weighty fantasy series has been crying out for. Still, how about a traditional adventure game with a setting highly reminiscent of Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson's beloved series? And it's by Powerhoof, which has made some of the best adventure games – free or not – of the last few years.

I won't beat around the bush. *Telwynium* is at once a faithful love letter to The Wheel of Time, and a masterful subversion of it, recreating familiar story beats and characters, and then having shocking things happen to them. Case in point: the mysterious mage Aldor Dwinn, who is murdered shortly after *The Telwynium: Book One* – the first entry in this (currently) two-game series – begins.

That's the premise for *Book One*: what would happen if The Wheel of Time's Moiraine suddenly dropped dead, shortly after the epic saga began? She's basically Gandalf, and you can imagine the drama if he died (for real) in The Lord of the Rings. Playing as a country bumpkin named Pendar Calden (he's essentially WoT's hero Rand), you spend *Book One* trying to save your childhood friends from creatures known as the shadowfell.

I'm reviewing *Book Two*, of course, but you should really play the first part first, as it directly sets up this sequel. It's smaller in scope than *Book Two*, but it spins a fresh story out of familiar elements, and features some great pixel art.

> **Pixel art that matches Sierra for character and atmosphere**

PIXEL PERFECT

Visually at least, *Telwynium* is modelled after the old Sierra games of the early '90s, with EGA-style pixel art that matches Sierra for character and atmosphere, and adds more detail. These are beautiful environments to explore as Pendar, with *Book Two* in particular making up for its compact world with some rather beautiful vistas.

But while it looks like a Sierra game, it doesn't play much like one, ejecting their fiddly interfaces for a modern, streamlined approach. You have an inventory, and a small selection of verbs: walk, look at and interact. That's enough to forge some clever puzzles around, and they're a little better here in *Book Two*, with the NPCs more ready to help you, instead of finding flimsy reasons for Pendar to handle everything himself.

Speaking of the characters, I wouldn't say they're as charming or memorable as Sierra at its best, but they do feel like they belong in a '90s fantasy series. It's the plot that's the star though: the eventual inversion of those fantasy tropes (Pendar is a powerful mage, but his power is *necromancy*), and the shocking conclusion that sets the stage for (fingers crossed) a *Book Three*. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A short, masterful adventure game inspired by a classic fantasy series

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Powerhoof

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

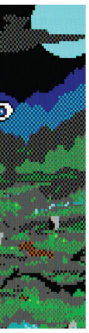
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/Telwynium

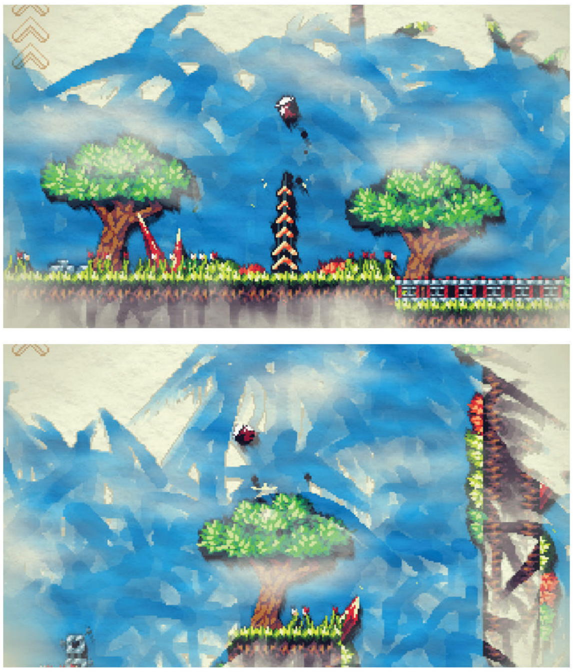
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The Telwynium: Book Two is a small adventure that packs in a lot. It feels like the middle part of an epic fantasy trilogy.

87



BELOW: You remove the top layer to reveal the world below.



HUE AND DRY

HUE FLOWING is a platformer dripping with style

Filling in a map is one of the best things in games. The best *and* the worst, as you may find your perfectionist tendencies taking over. Surprisingly, that didn't happen for me in Hue Flowing, probably because it's only 15 minutes long.

The entire level is swaddled in a thick fog of war, and you can only clear it by jumping around. The arc of your jump removes the foggy top layer of the canvas, revealing a world of pretty floating islands below.

It is odd, to jump in a platformer and not know if you're going to land safely on a platform, or tumble into the void. However, for the most part death is no bother, simply taking you back to the last platform you were on. Your first few minutes are a frenzy of leaping and drawing, as you gradually fill in the map.

The most satisfying thing about *Hue Flowing* is a visual effect that I suspect impacts the performance. Your leaping brush-strokes trickle down the screen, as if they're dripping water. It feels like you're painting with watercolours.

Oh, and underneath all that map-filling there's an enjoyable micro-platformer: a Metroidvania where you go from chump to God.

With *Celeste*-like controls, *Hue Flowing* goes beyond it in a way by giving you double, then triple… ultimately *six* jumps before you need to hit the ground. It feels obscene, in a good way, but you'll need them all to beat some difficult platforming sections, and reach the ending.

Not that there *is* a proper ending, but the satisfaction of mastering this world, and uncovering its floating islands, is enough. ■

60

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	DaFluffyPotato	bit.ly/HueFlowing

WINDOW DRESSING

BATTLE OF WINDOWS imagines a civil war on your desktop

One very specific niche I like is games set in operating systems. Games like *Digital: A Love Story*, which told a visual novel in the Amiga's Workbench OS. *Battle of Windows* does something similar, in that it repurposes an old version of Windows. However, the titular windows are given unlikely utility.

The windows of Windows have had a bit of a falling out, going to war in an aerial battle on your desktop. Enemy windows fly towards you from the right of the screen – as in a typical horizontal shmup – and, playing as a wizard, you have to fend them off by summoning windows of your own.

The cheapest window you can summon contains a clipart of a spaceship, which will automatically fire *Minesweeper* mines at the enemy. You can summon multiple ships, and position them wherever you want by dragging them around.

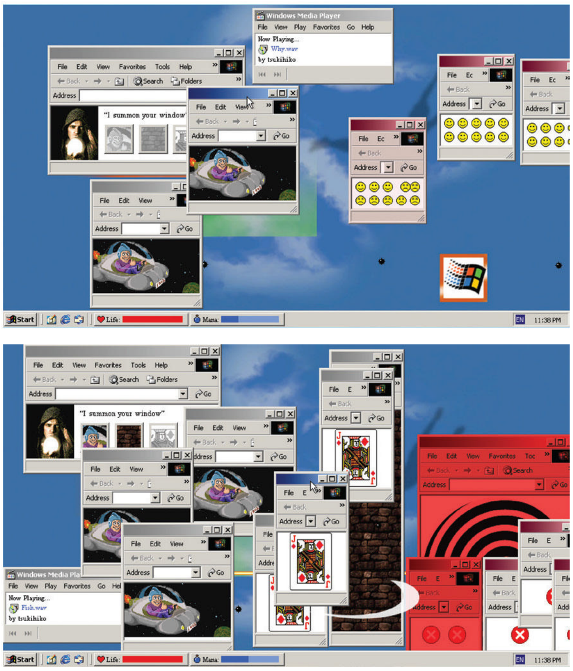
Walls physically restrain enemy windows, stopping them from reaching your wizard and reducing their health. It made me smile to watch them butt against them, piling up in a Windows traffic jam.

Eventually, stronger enemies appear. So, you summon *more* walls, and more ships, and you chuck in a few of the playing cards as well, which will attack enemy windows at close-range. Soon the screen is full of windows, which you're furiously squishing and dragging around – while you remember to skip the music player to an appropriate track.

This is a great idea, taking the Windows we all know so well and finding a fun new use for it. The game feels fresh thanks to its novel dragging mechanics. ■

79

BELOW: Ah, classic Windows. There's not a metro tile in sight.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	yumehiko	bit.ly/BattleOfWindows

AUSTRALIAN
PC AWARDS

2023

Finding gold in what was a very rocky mountain of a year. Words by Ben Mansill, Joel Burgess and Chris Szewczyk.

Welcome to a particularly interesting edition of the Australian PC Awards. Unlike most years in tech which are clean, tidy periods where everything runs smoothly and we all buy loads of nice new things, 2022 turned that upside down with one drama after another, all in a market where actual products you could buy were scarce, expensive, or delayed.

This is not to say the actual products were duds – au contraire – the tail end of 2022 in particular saw a spectacular period of new GPUs and CPUs, along with exciting new motherboard platforms. DDR5 got its act together and became good, and affordable, laptops leapt into new realms of low power and high performance, and some standout new techs blew us away, like QD OLED monitors.

The editorial teams here at *PC PowerPlay, PC Gamer* and *APC*, thoroughly enjoyed compiling these finalists, and then selecting the winners. It was a fascinating year with highs and lows. The highs weren't in short supply, it's just that the lows exceeded the expected quota by an alarming amount.

But, we have selected our winners and they are clear to us as the best of the best. Read on and see what got the big gongs, as well as what gear made our finalist lists. Maybe you agree, maybe you have differing opinions.

That's all good, 2022 was a confusing year in which buying gear was challenging, but thanks to these 2023 Australian PC Awards the cream has been separated and all the good stuff properly rewarded.

Motherboards

WE WERE REALLY SPOILED FOR CHOICE WHEN IT CAME TO MOTHERBOARDS IN 2022. Both AMD and Intel released new platforms meaning we had a huge variety of boards to choose from. In September, AMD released its AM5 platform, which added support for DDR5 memory. High end X670E boards were joined by X670, B650E and B650 boards. Four chipsets? Actually, they all use the same chip. It's just that the X series uses two of them, while the B series uses one. AMD says it intends to support AM5 for several years to come. If it has a long life like AM4 did, then you can expect to be able to upgrade to a Zen 5 or Zen 6 processor with just a BIOS flash.

Just a month later, Intel released its 13th Generation CPU range accompanied by Z790 motherboards. Z790 is more or less an evolution over Z690 with a better I/O thanks to the inclusion of more PCIe 4.0 lanes. This means Z790 boards typically have improved support for high bandwidth devices and controllers, including things like more PCIe 4.0 M.2 slots or things like USB 4 or Thunderbolt 4 controllers. Sadly, high quality motherboards are now expensive. It wasn't long ago that a $500 motherboard was regarded as ultra-premium. Now, $500 is considered mid-range.

But if you are prepared to pay, at least you can expect a high-quality product. Things like the power delivery, cooling, USB port count and speeds and support for faster M.2 drives mean you'll have a motherboard that will happily power a system for many years to come, no matter what you use a PC for.

AORUS
X670 AORUS ELITE AX

BEST MOTHERBOARD MAKER

GIGABYTE AORUS

Gigabyte's Aorus boards usually impress us with their quality feature sets, good value for money and cooling potential.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Asus, MSI

FINALISTS: Asus, Asrock, MSI, Gigabyte Aorus

BEST PREMIUM MOTHERBOARD

GIGABYTE X670 AORUS ELITE AX

The X670 Aorus Elite AX stands out with its excellent design and feature set. It offers everything you should realistically need without the exorbitant price of the flagship tier boards.

HIGHLY COMMENDED:
Asus ROG Crosshair X670E Hero
Asus ROG Strix Z790-I Gaming Wi-Fi

FINALISTS: MSI MEG X670E Ace, Asus ROG Crosshair X670E Hero, Gigabyte X670 Aorus Elite AX, Asrock X670E Taichi, MSI MAG Z790 Tomahawk DDR4, Asrock Z790 Steel Legend, Gigabyte Z790 Aorus Master, Asus ROG Strix Z790-I Gaming Wi-Fi

BEST VALUE MOTHERBOARD

MSI MAG B660M MORTAR MAX WIFI DDR4

This is a very good motherboard in general, but its ability to overclock a locked 12th Gen processor reminds us of the days of overclocking budget CPUs to high end performance levels. That's real value.

HIGHLY COMMENDED:
Asus Prime B660M-A WiFi DDR4
Gigabyte B650M Aorus Elite AX

FINALISTS: MSI MAG B660 Tomahawk WIFI DDR4, Asus TUF Gaming B660 Plus Wi-Fi D4, Asrock B660 Pro RS, Gigabyte B660I Aorus Pro DDR4, Asrock B650E PG Riptide Wi-Fi DDR5, Gigabyte B650M Aorus Elite AX, MSI MAG B660M Mortar Max Wifi DDR4, Asus Prime B660M-A Wi-Fi DDR4

Graphics

WHEN IT COMES TO GRAPHICS CARDS, 2022 WAS VERY MUCH A TALE OF TWO HALVES. The first part of the year was dominated by the influence of crypto mining, covid fallout and ongoing geopolitical concerns. That meant GPU pricing was simply ridiculous.

Once Ethereum shifted away from GPU mining, things slowly returned to normal. Stocks consistently appeared on shelves, prices dropped and PC gaming came back from its perilous position.

With mining in the rear view mirror, the latter part of 2022 was genuinely exciting thanks to the release of Nvidia's RTX 40 series and later on, AMD's RX 7900 series. Intel's long gestating Arc cards also made their debut, though they didn't have the impact Intel would have hoped for.

The RTX 4090 was unveiled in September. It retained peak mining era pricing, but if you were prepared to pay, you were rewarded with the highest performing GPU ever made. The RTX 4080 followed, and though it's an excellent GPU, its popularity suffered as a result of its high price.

The end of the year saw the release of AMD's RX 7900 series. While the 7900 XTX couldn't knock the 4090 off of its perch, RX 7900s are still competitive options with both introducing chiplet technology to consumer GPUs for the first time.

If 2022 was the year of high prices and high end cards, 2023 is looking better, with both companies (and perhaps Intel too) set to release compelling mainstream options.

BEST GRAPHICS CARD MAKER

MSI

MSI consistently produces high quality graphics cards that offer an excellent blend of build quality, cooling ability, and low noise levels without charging the Earth.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Asus, Sapphire

FINALISTS: Asus, MSI, Gigabyte Aorus, Asrock, Sapphire, Zotac, Powercolor

BEST VALUE GRAPHICS CARD

MSI GEFORCE RTX 3050 GAMING X

The MSI GeForce RTX 3050 Gaming X stood out in a very tough market thanks to its excellent cooling and shockingly good value for money.

HIGHLY COMMENDED:
XFX Speedster MERC 308 RX 6650 XT
Gigabyte GeForce RTX 3050 Gaming OC 8GB

FINALISTS: MSI GeForce RTX 3050 Gaming X, Sapphire Pulse Radeon RX 6400, MSI Radeon RX 6650 XT Gaming X 8G, Gigabyte GeForce RTX 3050 Gaming OC 8GB, XFX Speedster MERC 308 RX 6650 XT, Gigabyte Radeon RX 6500 XT Eagle

BEST PREMIUM GRAPHICS CARD

ASUS ROG STRIX RTX 4090 OC EDITION

If you want the best, and don't mind paying, then there's only one choice: The RTX 4090. Asus took a great GPU and made it better.

HIGHLY COMMENDED:
Sapphire Nitro+ Radeon RX 7900 XTX Vapor-X 24GB

FINALISTS: Asus TUF Gaming GeForce RTX 3090TI, Asus ROG Strix RTX 4090 OC Edition, MSI GeForce RTX 4080 16GB Suprim X, Asus TUF Gaming GeForce RTX 4080 OC Edition, Sapphire Nitro+ Radeon RX 7900 XTX Vapor-X 24GB

CPU

2022 WAS A HUGE YEAR FOR CPU RELEASES. The start of the year was dominated by the release of Intel's mainstream 12th Generation range including the excellent Core i5 12400. AMD also fleshed out its Zen 3 range, with more affordable Ryzen 5000 series CPUs. All of these CPUs were welcome at a time when value for money was becoming a difficult thing to find.

One of the highlights of the year, if not the last decade, was the release of the AMD Ryzen 7 5800X3D. Its stacked cache is very much cutting-edge technology. This CPU with its 96MB of L3 cache offered gamers in particular a very compelling upgrade option. Chip stacking is a big part of AMD and Intel's future plans.

These were impressive and highly recommended CPUs, but the big headlines were reserved for the September launch of AMD's Ryzen 7000 series CPUs, and just a month later, Intel's 13th Generation CPUs.

Both can be considered an evolution over their predecessors, delivering generally better performance and/or power efficiency. Intel increased core counts across the range, negating the advantage AMD held for many years.

It wasn't all cheers and high fives though. Both companies generally increased their power consumption levels at each product tier which means there's a need for very good cooling to tame the faster chips from both AMD and Intel.

BEST VALUE CPU

CORE I5 12400

The Core i5 12400 really punches above its weight, delivering excellent performance at a genuinely budget price.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

AMD Ryzen 7 5700X

FINALISTS

Intel Core i5 12400F, AMD Ryzen 7 5700X, AMD Ryzen 5 5600, Intel Core i3 12100

BEST MID-RANGE CPU

INTEL CORE I5 13600K

The i5 13600K is a stellar CPU. It's an excellent choice for gaming, productivity or general use, without needing too much power or requiring expensive cooling.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

AMD Ryzen 7 5800X3D

FINALISTS

Intel Core i5 13600K, Intel Core i7 12700, AMD Ryzen 7 5800X3D

BEST PREMIUM CPU

AMD RYZEN 9 7950X

The 7950X narrowly takes out the win thanks to its excellent all round performance, and doing so without letting go of power efficiency.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Intel Core i9 13900K

FINALISTS

Intel Core i9 13900K, AMD Ryzen 9 7950X , AMD Ryzen 7 7700X, AMD Ryzen 9 7900X

> "The start of the year was dominated by the release of Intel's mainstream 12th Generation range including the excellent Core i5 12400."

Storage

IF 2022 WAS A BIG YEAR FOR PC COMPONENT RELEASES, THE STORAGE INDUSTRY WASN'T SO EXCITING. That's not to say PC storage isn't faster and more affordable at each capacity, it's just that there wasn't a product or release that didn't feel like an evolution of something that came before. The best drives in 2022 weren't necessarily the fastest ones, but rather the ones that offered a good balance of speed, capacity and value for money.

PCIe 4.0 drives saturated the market and more or less hit their performance ceiling, at least in terms of sequential transfer speeds. With lots of competing brands, a high speed M.2 drive became more affordable than ever – a win for consumers.

PCIe 3.0 M.2 drives became relegated to budget status. As they approached price parity with SATA drives, they became very good options for things like bulk media storage or for storing space hogging game libraries.

Speaking of SATA, the humble hard drive isn't going away any time soon. Large mechanical drives are still much cheaper per gigabyte than flash solutions and they remain highly relevant.

We expected PCIe 5.0 SSDs to launch in 2022, but sadly they were nowhere to be found.

BEST INTERNAL STORAGE MAKER

WD

Western Digital introduced some excellent SSDs that offered great value for money – something we can all appreciate – while losing little performance to much more expensive drives.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Samsung

FINALISTS

WD, Samsung, Silicon Power, MSI, Kingston, PNY, Seagate, XPG

BEST EXTERNAL STORAGE MAKER

SAMSUNG

The field was flooded by fast external and portable storage devices, but Team Samsung shone the brightest, as exemplified by the T7 Shield, which packs USB-C 3.2 Gen 2 NVMe performance into a very rugged enclosure with great security features.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Team Group

FINALISTS

Team Group, WD, Seagate, Samsung, Adata, SanDisk, PNY, LaCie

Systems

2022 WAS THE YEAR OF SYSTEMS DEFYING SIZE EXPECTATIONS AND BREAKING NORMS. Whether it was Apple releasing a MacBook Air that's more expensive than a number of MacBook Pro devices, or Razer's Blade 15 with a 3080 Ti that's thinner and lighter than a LG Gram 16 2-in-1 and MacBook Pro 16, today's engineering is shrinking powerful components into unbelievably compact packages.

The fourth generation of NVMe PCIe SSDs ushered in practical read speeds over 7,000MB/s and write speeds of more than 5,000MB/s. Rates that almost seem more like RAM transfer speeds than something that you'd use to retrieve Word and OS files.

We saw a handful of OLED screens on approachably priced ultrabooks and many of the players at the top end are introducing novel features like integrated glass trackpads, displays on the outside of laptops, laptop screens that hinge like drawing tables, and others that have a whole second screen emerging from the keyboard.

Professional gamers can now expect their portable rig to offer 360Hz displays, while recreational gamers can indulge in HDR games at high refresh rates on 1440P or even 4K screens if they don't mind paying for it.

GPUs were a bit of a minefield again this year, with TDP Wattage and thermal dissipation capabilities impacting performance significantly more than the label on the tin. Even then wattage didn't translate perfectly into performance either, so it's more critical than ever to read a review of the laptop you want to buy to understand its performance.

Intel's 12th gen laptop processors shifted to a high core count dual-performance-and-efficiency core array structure that dramatically improved performance across the board, Apple tweaked its original processor with new memory bandwidth and AI capabilities in the M2 and Nvidia introduced Optimus to greatly improve the experience of trying to optimise battery life and performance on gaming laptops.

BEST VALUE LAPTOP OR 2-IN-1

MICROSOFT SURFACE LAPTOP GO 2

Offering enough power to smoothly run Windows 11 in a sleek touchscreen laptop with current networking and connectivity specs for $1k is a pretty great deal.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Lenovo IdeaPad Duet Chromebook
Framework Laptop

FINALISTS

Acer Enduro Urban N3, Dynabook Tecra A40-K, Microsoft Surface Laptop Go 2, Framework Laptop, MSI Prestige 14Evo A12M, Microsoft Surface Laptop Go 2, Dynabook E10-S, Microsoft Surface Go 3, Acer Aspire 5, Dell Inspiron 15, Acer Chromebook Spin 311, Asus Vivobook 15

BEST PREMIUM LAPTOP OR 2-IN-1

APPLE MACBOOK AIR 2022 (M2)

Solid M2 performance improvements, a sleek design overhaul, all at a reasonable price.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Microsoft Surface Laptop Studio
Asus Vivobook Pro 16X OLED
Asus Zenbook 14X Space Edition

FINALISTS

MSI G76 Stealth, Microsoft Surface Laptop Studio, Asus Zephyrus M16, Dell XPS 13 Plus, Apple MacBook Air M2, Dell XPS 15 (9520), LG Gram 2-in-1 16", Asus Zenbook 14X Space Edition, Fujitsu Lifebook U9312, Lenovo Slim 7 Pro X, Asus Zephyrus Duo 16, HP Envy x360 13.3-inch 2-in-1, Microsoft Surface Pro 9, Microsoft Surface Laptop 5, Asus Vivobook Pro 16X

BEST GAMING LAPTOP

RAZER BLADE 15

As thin as the LG Gram 16-inch 2-in-1 and 100g lighter than a MacBook Air 16, even with a Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080 Ti inside of it.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Asus ROG Zephyrus G14
Asus ROG Strix Scar 17 SE

FINALISTS

MSI GE76 Raider, Asus ROG Zephyrus G15, Razer Blade 17 (2022), Alienware x14, Razer Blade 15, Asus ROG Strix Scar 17 SE, Asus ROG Zephyrus G14, Aorus 17, Asus ROG Zephyrus G15, Asus ROG Zephyrus m16, Asus ROG Flow Z13, Asus ROG Zephyrus Duo 16, Lenovo Legion 5i Pro Gen 7, Dell G15, Dell Inspiron 16 Plus 7620

BEST DESKTOP PC MAKER

PC CASE GEAR

This win recognises PCCG's quality of service, build quality and testing regime for customer builds before shipping. Their range might not be the widest or very cost-effective, but you'll get a great system and be well looked after if you do buy one.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Apple
Aftershock PC

FINALISTS

Apple, MSI, HP, Mwave, Leader, PC Case Gear, Intel, Alienware, Nzxt, Lenovo, Acer, Aftershock PC

"2022 was the year of systems defying size expectations and breaking norms. Whether it was Apple releasing a MacBook Air that's more expensive than a number of MacBook Pro devices, or Razer's Blade 15 with a 3080 Ti that's thinner and lighter than a LG Gram 16 2-in-1 and MacBook Pro 16."

Peripherals and components

THROUGH 2022 THE TRANSITION FROM DDR4 TO DDR5 AS THE NEW STANDARD FOR MOST NEW MOTHERBOARDS TOOK PLACE. Initial scarcity and high pricing has given way to better value, lower timings and wide availability.

Air CPU coolers continue to hold strong in the face of the ongoing AIO assault, and our Labs were dominated by one company that we always thought of as just being all about value, but the quality was a very happy surprise and shows you don't need to spend over $100 to cool a premium CPU.

Wi-Fi 6-routers really matured in 2022 and a few incredible models transformed the market.

The big news in monitors is QD OLED. As distinct from the non-QD OLEDs that first appeared, adding the Quantum Dot layer defeated OLED's big weakness, being a lack of brightness.

Keyboards, mice and headphones saw no huge evolutions in the last year, still, there are occasionally some interesting designs though style drives this segment more than others.

"The big news in monitors is QD OLED. As distinct from the non-QD OLEDs that first appeared, adding the Quantum Dot layer defeated OLED's big weakness, being a lack of brightness."

MEMORY MAKER

G.SKILL

G.Skill can always be relied upon to push the boundaries of memory technology. But it's not all about raw speed. The company has some great value mainstream options too.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Team Group

FINALISTS

PNY, G.Skill, Team Group, Corsair, Kingston, Adata, Geil

COOLING PRODUCT

BE QUIET PURE ROCK 2 FX

An air cooler? Yes! At a time when it seemed AIO liquid coolers would completely take over, this Be Quiet budget champion came along and impressed us with its cooling ability and excellent value for money.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

DeepCool LS720 (360mm) AIO

FINALISTS

Deep Cool CK560, Deep Cool AK400, DeepCool LS720 (360mm) AIO, DeepCool LE500 CPU Cooler, Be Quiet Pure Loop 2 FX, Be Quiet Pure Rock 2 FX, Thermalright Peerless Assassin 120 SE

MONITOR

ALIENWARE AW3423DW QD-OLED

This monitor features the first combination of brightness boosting Quantum Dot tech and contrast enhancing OLED to make an unbeatably vibrant ultra-wide screen with a 175 Hz refresh rate. DCI-P3 colour and a 1ms response time.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Benq Zowie 360Hz XL2566K
Samsung M8 Smart Monitor

FINALISTS

MSI Optix MAG281URF, BenQ Mobiuz EX3210R, Apple Studio Display, Benq GW2785TC, Alienware AW3423DW QD-OLED, Samsung M8 Smart Monitor, Acer Predator XB323QK, Prism+ C315 Max, Dell 32 4K UHD Gaming Monitor G3223Q, Prism+ PG270 Ultra, Samsung 55" Odyssey Ark, LG UltraGear 48GQ900, Benq Zowie 360Hz XL2566K, LG 27GP950-B

KEYBOARD

STEELSERIES APEX PRO MINI

The SteelSeries Apex Pro Mini Wireless is brimming with features, from its dual actuation capable keys to its customisable actuation points.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Corsair K70 RGB Pro
DeepCool KB500

FINALISTS

DeepCool KB500, Corsair K70 RGB Pro, Asus ROG Strix Scope RX TKL Wireless Deluxe, Corsair K70 Pro Mini Wireless, SteelSeries Apex Pro Mini, Alienware AW510K

MOUSE

LOGITECH LIFT VERTICAL MOUSE

Not only does the wireless Logitech Lift ergonomic mouse put our hand in a more natural, neutral position to prioritise well-being, but it also offers a lot of productivity-minded features.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Razer DeathAdder V3 Pro

FINALISTS

Logitech Lift Vertical Mouse, Razer Huntsman Mini Analog, Nzxt Lift, Logitech MX Master 3S, Corsair Katar Elite Wireless, Microsoft Modern Mobile Mouse, Razer DeathAdder V3 Pro, Asus ROG Chakram X

GAMING HEADSET

STEELSERIES ARCTIS NOVA PRO

With its multi-device-and-platform connectivity, long battery life, amazing comfort, and that excellent sound quality that Arctis headsets are known for, this is the one to get.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

JBL Quantum 610 Wireless headset

FINALISTS

SteelSeries Arctis 7+, JBL Quantum 610, Asus ROG Delta S Wireless, Alienware Tri-Mode AW920H, JBL Quantum 810, SteelSeries Arctis Nova Pro, HyperX Cloud Alpha Wireless

CASE

FRACTAL DESIGN NORTH

Combining a unique wood-and-mesh front and lots of airflow-focused features at an affordable price, Fractal's North is a fantastic case with performance that's just as impressive as its looks.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Nzxt H7 Flow

FINALISTS

Corsair iCUE 5000T RGB, Be Quiet Pure Base 500 FX case, Nzxt H7 Flow, Cooler Master Cosmos C700M, Corsair 1000D, Fractal Design North

ROUTER

SYNOLOGY RT6600AX

The Synology RT6600ax has every router feature a smart home or SMB could need including the ability to create 15 different SSIDs with different Firewall policies. It's one of the fastest Wi-Fi routers we've ever tested – with excellent range, too.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

TP-Link Deco XE75 AXE5400
Synology WRX560
Draytek Vigor2927ax

FINALISTS

Asus ROG GT-AX6000, TP Link Deco X73-DSL, Synology RT6600ax, Fritz!Box 4060, Mercusys AX1800, TP Link WiFi 6E Deco, Asus Zen WiF XT12 Pro, Draytek Vigor2927ax, Synology Router WRX560, Draytek Vigor2865ax

BEST RESELLER

PC CASE GEAR

In a year where GPU stock was hard to keep available, for gamers PCCG seemed to always have some stock available along with extra SKUs or different models that weren't available elsewhere, plus its PC builds are always competitive and well-balanced.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

BPCtech
Mwave

FINALISTS

Aftershock PC, Allied Gaming PC, Austin, BPCtech, Centre Com, Computer Alliance, CPL Online, IJK, JW, Mwave, PC Case Gear, PLE, Scorptec, TI Computers, Umart, MSY

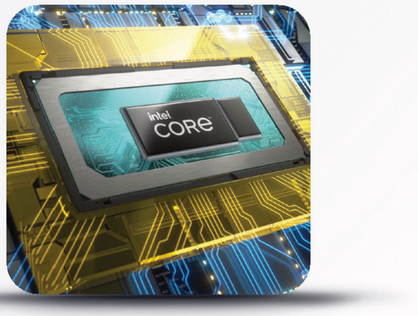
DURING THE YEAR OF THE GREAT GRAPHICS CARD DROUGHT, AUSTRALIAN RESELLERS DID IT TOUGH.

The struggle to get stock was one issue, while keeping customers with orders placed informed of an often heavily delayed delivery process was another thing they had to face – all while doing their best to get new customers in an era of stock scarcity and pricing inflation.

It wasn't just graphics cards, but that situation typified the challenges resellers faced in 2022. And, we were so impressed with how most of them handled it. Communication and transparency was great to see, with many resellers having daily updated reports on stock and expected delays.

Through all of that they also had to keep at it with the regular business of building, selling and supporting new PCs and other gear. It was a tough year, but by and large they shone, and our hats off to the people at the front line doing their best to keep customers happy.

> "The struggle to get stock was one issue, while keeping customers with orders placed informed of an often heavily delayed delivery process was another thing they had to face – all while doing their best to get new customers in an era of stock scarcity and pricing inflation."



Excellence

For the person, product or technology that advanced the PC more than any other in 2022

INTEL'S 12TH-GEN MOBILE CPUS

DESPITE ALL THE SUPPLY CHAIN ISSUES AND ECONOMIC CHAOS, TECH COMPANIES WERE ACTUALLY ABLE TO DELIVER A WIDE RANGE OF SERIOUSLY-IMPRESSIVE NOVEL TECHNOLOGIES IN 2022.

The APCA 2023 Excellence award is for the person, product or technology that progressed the PC the most in 2022 and whether it's AMD's vertically stacked CPU V-Cache or RDNA 3 chiplet GPU architecture; Nvidia's advances to powerful GPUs and next generation DLSS; or Apple's continuation of it's RISC processor range with the M1 Ultra, which outperformed all but one consumer CPU on the market at launch; there's no doubting that 2022 was huge for PC developments.

There were even more developments in updated Wi-Fi 6E networking technologies, the living room PC got perhaps its biggest flood of novel large-format monitors, and new game game streaming technologies all contributed to help people expand where and how they can use their computers. But while all these technologies were significant, there was one technology that made a bigger difference to the overall PC landscape than any other.

Intel's 12th generation notebook processors adopted a dual-type core structure, consisting of single-threaded efficiency cores and hyper-threaded performance cores that dramatically increased the number of cores Intel used in notebook CPUs and facilitated between nine and 37 percent performance bumps on chips all the way up to the Intel Core i9-12900HK. This is a major shift from the 10 to 15 percent year-on-year performance jumps we are used to seeing and allowed Intel to convincingly outpace AMD's offerings and compete, in many ways, with Apple's processors.

Intel is still the backbone of the vast majority of laptops out there, and so the major leap forward in 12th Gen CPU performance and efficiency effectively raises the bar for all notebooks in the space from lightweight tablet 2-in-1s to premium gaming workstations.

> "Intel is still the backbone of the vast majority of laptops out there, and so the major leap forward in 12th Gen CPU performance and efficiency effectively raises the bar for all notebooks in the space from lightweight tablet 2-in-1s to premium gaming workstations."

HIGHLY COMMENDED
Microsoft PC Game Pass
QD OLED monitors
AMD Ryzen 7 5800X3D / V-Cache

FINALISTS
AMD Ryzen 5800X3D / V-Cache
Nvidia RTX 4090
Nvidia DLSS 3
QD OLED monitors
Apple M2 CPU
Wi-Fi 6E
10GbE LAN
Intel 12th-Gen Mobile CPUs,
Microsoft PC Game Pass
AMD Chiplet GPU
Apple M1 Ultra CPU

THE 2023 AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS IS PROUDLY PRESENTED BY

AFTERSHOCK · ASUS · CORSAIR · dynabook · Fractal · G.SKILL · msi · PCCG · SAMSUNG

"There's simply no weak area in any segment of Asus' wide range of products. It covers so many different areas and yet is able to deliver a big range of high quality gear giving consumers great choice, and a knowledge that whatever you buy from Asus will be well designed and made, usually with price-point options to meet every need and budget."

Gold

The company that impressed us the most, overall, in 2022

ASUS

THE CHALLENGES 2022 IMPOSED ON A COMPANY DELIVERING GOOD CONSUMER TECH IN 2022 WERE BIG ONES. On one hand, we had all the excitement of new-gen products being launched that will shape PC performance for the next couple of years, but on the other, supply chain disruptions affected factory output, and the cost of making stuff and getting it shipped around the world.

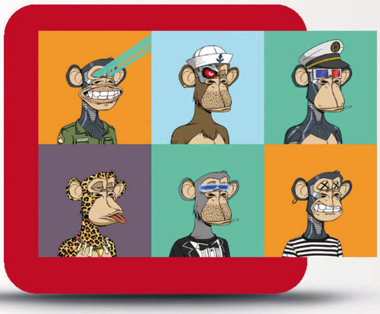
Meanwhile, these companies had to continue the pace of innovation and deliver value.

As we reviewed the potential winners and discussed what did well, it became crystal clear that there was one company that succeeded more than any other. It's the same company that has won this award in the past, and it's Asus.

There's simply no weak area in any segment of Asus' wide range of products. It covers so many different areas and yet is able to deliver a big range of high quality gear giving consumers great choice, and a knowledge that whatever you buy from Asus will be well designed and made, usually with price-point options to meet every need and budget.

Asus scored more finalist nominations than any other company here, and by a huge margin. That's testament to the breadth and quality we've come to expect from Asus.

HIGHLY COMMENDED
MSI
Intel
Microsoft



Epic fail

2022's biggest loser

NFTs

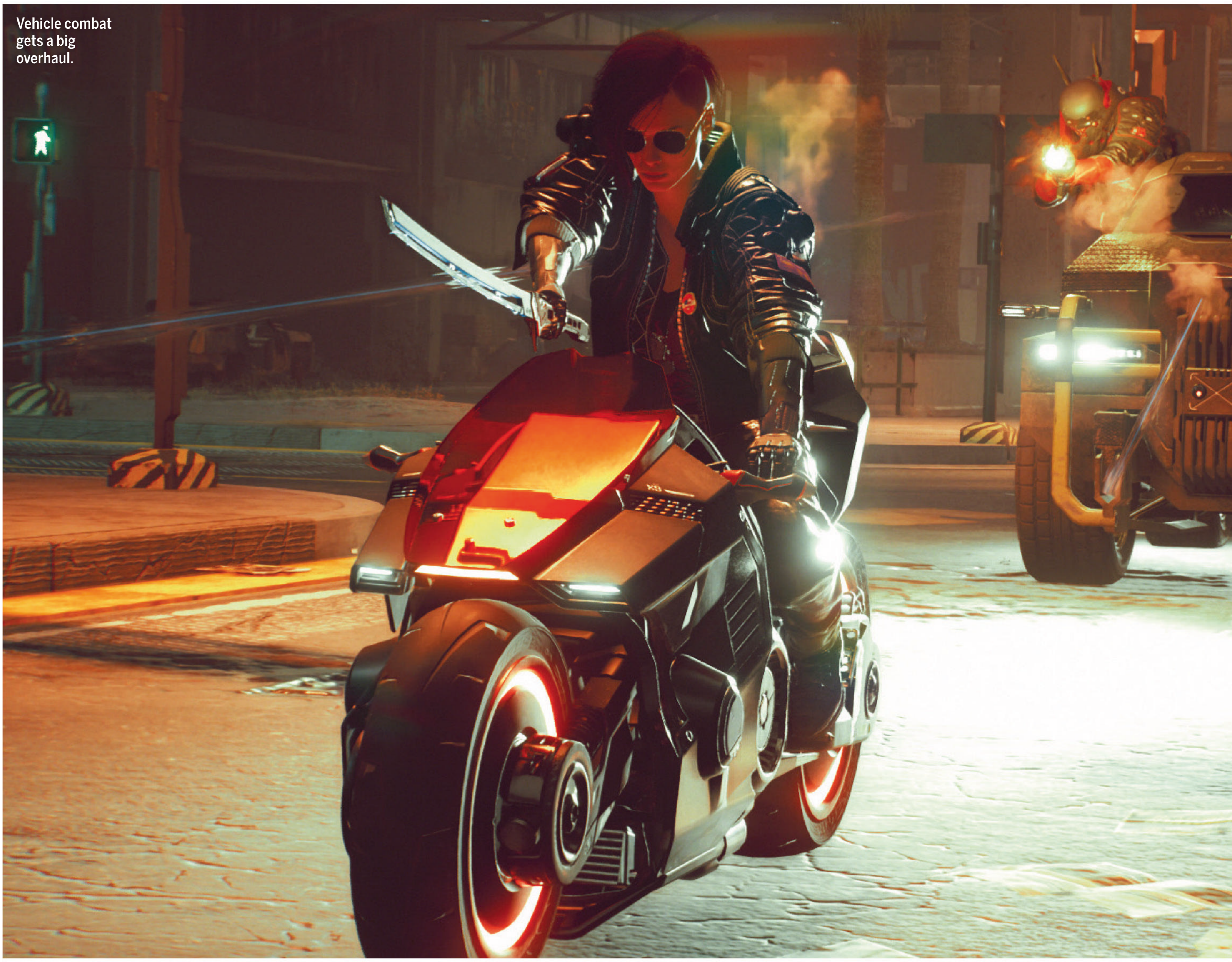
WHAT A BANNER YEAR 2022 WAS FOR THINGS THAT FLOPPED. It's hard to recall a year richer in failure than 2022. So much so, that we have introduced the Epic Fail Award for the very first time. Our shortlist is a mind-boggling collection of promises made and not delivered upon. It is a finalist list that has comedy, and tragedy.

For some of these, we could all see the writing on the wall, and it was just a matter of time before the implosion. NFTs and the Metaverse count among those. In Australia we got two huge data hacks with Optus and Medibank, but we didn't get the Steam Deck... we couldn't get a graphics card without paying stupid money, and we briefly got an RTX 4080 12GB card before it was swiftly 'unlaunched' in a comically poor bit of marketing strategy from Nvidia.

But the gong goes to NFTs. It's rare that something so absurd has any degree of success, yet a great many people had faith that a picture that's not actually a picture has value. Jimmy Fallon and Paris Hilton got sued for spruiking them, Donald Trump got in on the action with a shamelessly low effort set of NFTs, and the market is imploding. Well done NFTs, thank you for the laughs, and we're sorry if any of you lost money on these things.

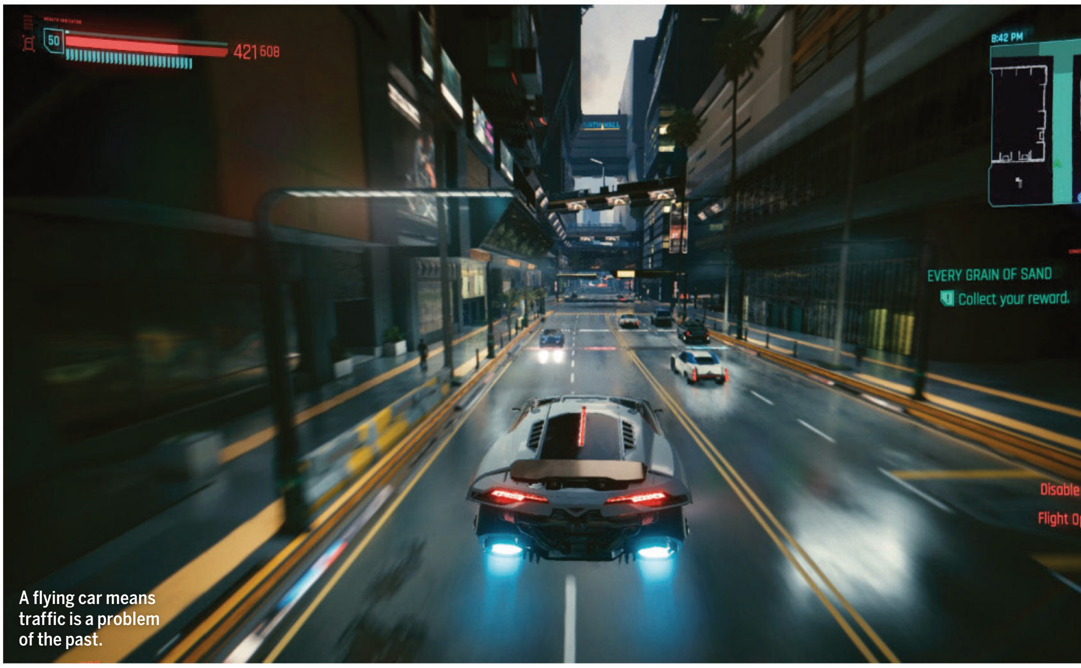
Taking the Highly Commended is Mr Elon Musk. 2022 was one cluster of muck after another for Musk. His badly botched Twitter takeover is the main reason he's taking a prize today, but we can't help stare in awe at how he alienated much of his customer and fan base through the year by embracing extreme political views, and burning all the fame and goodwill he accumulated over the last decade.

HIGHLY COMMENDED
Elon Musk
FINALISTS
NFTs
The Metaverse
GPU pricing and availability
Optus & Medibank hacks
Elon Musk
No Steam Deck in Australia yet
Google Stadia
Crypto currency
Nvidia RTX 4080 12GB Unlaunching



Vehicle combat gets a big overhaul.

ABOVE: Limit V to subtitles, making him an old-school silent protagonist.


50
421 608
8:42 PM
EVERY GRAIN OF SAND
Collect your reward.
Disable

A flying car means traffic is a problem of the past.

CYBERPUNK 2077

Mod the future. *By Noah Smith & Christopher Livingston*

C*yberpunk 2077* has undergone some serious changes and improvements over the past 18 months, with lots of bug fixes and the addition of long-requested features like transmog coming to the first-person RPG. Providing another big boost to the playerbase is the Netflix anime series that's gotten people back in the mood to either revisit Night City or to try the game for the very first time.

And modders have been busy, too. There are now troves of mods to download and install, featuring everything from flying cars to improved motorcycles to overhauls of combat and the police force. Below, you'll find our picks for the best mods for *Cyberpunk 2077* as of early 2023.

GANG RELATED

Let's start with your enemies. Are Night City's gangs feeling a bit too copy-and-paste? Try rmk1234's identity-based overhaul called *Lifepath Bonuses and Gang-Corp Traits*, a top-to-bottom NPC rebalance that gives the factions of Night City buffs and debuffs, including custom firewalls that affect how you'll approach combat.

Everyone from the Tyger Claws to Militech gets their own unique faction bonuses with this mod – the Maelstrom gang, for example, is now completely immune to covert hacks, burning and bleeding, in addition to significant resistance to headshots and assault weapons. This mod is a standout in a series of fantastic gameplay and balance mods by rmk1234, and I found that pairing this with their other mods, especially *Toxicity*, *Level Scaling and Balance*, and *AI Netrunners Enhanced*, gave me the thoughtful, tactical combat I found missing from the base game.

NEED TO KNOW

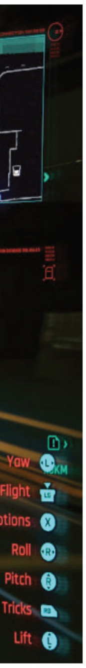
RELEASE	DEVELOPER
December 9, 2020	CD Projekt Red
PUBLISHER	**LINK**
In-house	cyberpunk.net

With gangs done, let's fix up our character of V. In my experience, *Cyberpunk*'s progression is often undermined by a resource economy that tosses mountains of equipment, consumables, and experience at you, all very slightly better than what you already have. I recommend enforcing a spending cap on the garbage economy with Captain12's mod, called *Auto Scaling Weapons and Armor*. It'll cut way down on the time you spend in weapon store menus and let you save your eddies for the legendary gear that's really worth your while. If you're into the idea of having *Cyberpunk 2077* play out a bit more like the tabletop game, I recommend also trying RMK's *Level Scaling with Higher Minimum Levels*. Combined, these mods ensure that a good gun will always be good, and keeps your character from steamrollering through early game content you may have missed.

ARE NIGHT CITY'S GANGS FEELING A BIT TOO COPY-AND-PASTE?

SILENT RUNNING

The appeal of this next mod will probably rely on how you feel about videogame protagonists in general. Some players love a hero that talks, while others (often the people raised on games like *Half-Life*, *Doom*, or *The Legend of Zelda*) prefer the completely silent protagonist.



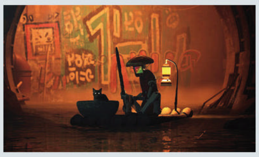
OTHERPUNK

Other games to get your cyberpunk fix

CLOUDPUNK
Cyberpunk doesn't just mean clawing people with arm-blades. You can just deliver packages.

UMURANGI GENERATION
A stylish adventure with a bold, important anti-colonial message, and it's a hell of a photo game.

CITIZEN SLEEPER
You're a worker in a corporate hellscape, with bounty hunters and AI nipping at your heels.



STRAY
I checked the rules, and there's nothing that says you can't be a cat in a cyberpunk game. Meow.

Personally, I love the way V talks. Unfortunately, the far-off world of 2077 rarely challenges perceptions of gender and identity beyond the game's main quest, reinforced by a rigid gender binary that makes roleplaying a non-binary character an uphill immersion battle. Thankfully, V's booming gendered monologues can now be completely silenced with dirtythekid's quick and easy *Silent Protagonist* mods. No matter what version of V you're playing, you can limit their dialogue to subtitles only, resulting in a more traditional, old-school RPG experience.

Need a rest? Me too. My V has been awake for weeks on end, hustling and grinding Night City's seediest underbellies in the hopes of affording a car that doesn't handle like a wet soap bar. Well, modder CrazySD has intervened, nefariously incentivising semi-frequent sleep and grooming by tying them to your EXP gain and health regen rate. It's a simple mod called *Better Housing Buffs*, but the little things go a long way, and it soon becomes second nature to drive home and catch some shut-eye after a big quest or dramatic story beat. Grabbing a shower refreshes your regeneration rate more, sleeping in your bed further increases your experience gain, and a coffee beefs up max stamina more than in the vanilla game.

POLICE ACTION

There's been a lot of work done by the modding community towards addressing the deficiencies of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s police system, and out of them all, my favourite has been modder Scissors123454321's police system rework contained within their *Vehicle Combat* overhaul. No longer does Night City's omnipresent police force immediately protect and serve you upon the slightest infraction. Crimes require witnesses, and witnesses have to make calls to the cops. Further, Night City's gangs and corps aren't embarrassed to call in their friends, too.

But a more realistic police response doesn't mean it's a free-for-all in Night City. Stealthy players will be challenged to find ways to drop their targets without anyone being the wiser, and heavy-handed types will have to keep to a tight schedule to escape unharmed. That's because the cops in the mod are psycho to the core – they'll do anything to drop you at two stars or higher. Thankfully, the ability to shoot back from the safety of the driver's seat levels the playing field. It's a little janky, and don't be shocked when something inevitably breaks, but pulling off a gig that went loud and wiping out cars full of cops, corpos and gangers from your driver's side window mid-drift is an iconic trailer moment finally realised.

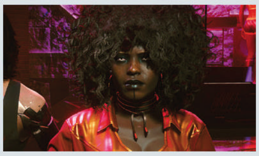
There's another police-related mod to deal with another issue in *2077*. CD Projekt has said it's planning a big police overhaul in the future, to finally make the cops a bit more realistic when they show up to fight crime. Currently, it's a bit unsatisfying: they just teleport to your location. That feels like cheating. The *Enhanced Police* mod by mandruis7 makes the arrival of cops more reasonable. With a one-star warrant level, cops will arrive on foot, but at higher levels they'll show up on bikes and in police cars and actually pursue you.

FRIENDLY SKIES

We all know the future promised us flying cars, and there actually are some airborne vehicles in a few scenes in *Cyberpunk 2077*. But when you're playing the game itself, the only cars you can drive remain firmly on the ground. That doesn't seem fair, does it? Luckily, modder jackhumbert had the same thought and you can finally take your ride to the skies with the *Let There Be Flight* mod. The mod includes several different control schemes, plus custom sounds and visual effects. At last, Night City really does feel like the future.

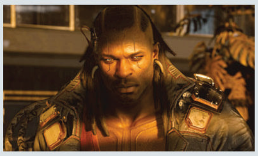
MISSED CONNECTIONS

The coolest Cyberpunk 2077 *characters*



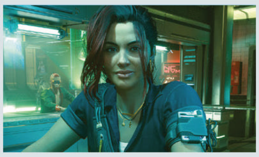
DENNY

Denny is a drummer and is probably the coolest single character in the game.



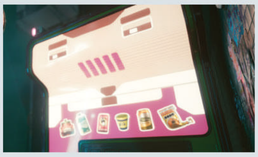
PLACIDE

We call him the 'anti-RPG character' because he treats you like a nobody.



CLAIRE

I thought Claire liked me, but she was just using me to further her goals. Respect.



BRENDAN

I know, he's a vending machine, but I'm mostly made of machinery, too.

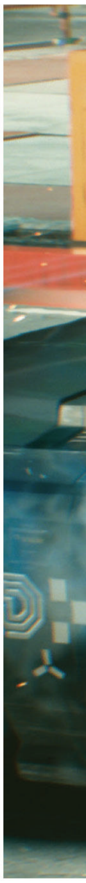
You're not just hopping into a car and lurching into the air like you're using a noclip cheat mode, either. The mod adds custom thruster models with a nice glow to the undercarriage of the cars. There are custom sound effects, too, a lovely thrumming and humming noise when you lift off. Throw in the ability to pull off some barrel rolls, and I can't think of a better way to get around Night City.

WE ALL KNOW THE FUTURE PROMISED US FLYING CARS

Speaking of vehicles, there are some sweet motorcycles in *Cyberpunk 2077* but they've never really felt all that great to drive. The *Bike Overhaul* mod by Suprt132 addresses a lot of the issues with bikes, making them faster and better to operate. Now when you're speeding around the city, V will lean with the bike when making turns.

Cyberpunk 2077 is a singleplayer game, but that doesn't mean you need to take on the world all by yourself. If you want to feel the possibilities of the future, the *Drone Companions* mod by Scissors123454321 lets you craft and customise some robotic buddies. And they're not just around to be your pals, they'll fight alongside you. The mod adds a new operating system called Techdeck, which lets you build androids, drones and mechs. Each can be upgraded and customised, and they'll help you take down any enemies you target.

Finally, there's no question that your cyberarms are cool, but are they cool enough? The *Arasaka Cyberarms* mod by Aanderz gives you a whole bunch of replacement skins for your arms, a library for you to choose from. Your arms can look like Iron Man, you can have glowing Mantis blades of several colours, and pick from lots of different decals. The world of *Cyberpunk* is all about style, so don't settle for arms that look like you bought them off the shelf. Customise them! ■



ABOVE: Cops that actually chase you? I don't believe it.

FAR LEFT: Finally, some drones will be on your side.

LEFT: Better bikes, something we've wanted since day one.

Robotic buddies can not only ride with you, but fight for you.

PLAY THE

DEAD SPACE SECRET ENDING

Find these fragments in New Game+ *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

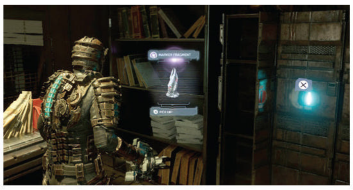
DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
17 hours

VITAL LINKS

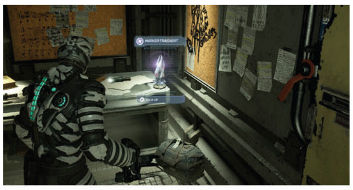
Where to get every gun in Dead Space:
bit.ly/3DsaCBb

Dead Space Crew Rig locations:
bit.ly/3Y85jyX



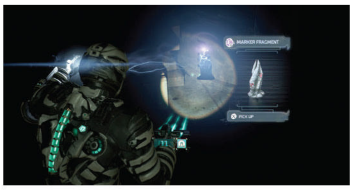
TRAM CONTROL

1 The first marker fragment is easy to get since it's next to where you have to collect the Data Board in Tram Control during chapter one. Look to the right of the workbench to spy the fragment on a bookcase, though you may have to shoot some books to access it.



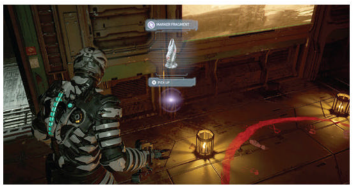
KYNE'S OFFICE

2 The second fragment is located in a secret room in Dr Terence Kyne's office. You can find his office in the Research Wing of the Medical Deck during chapter two. Use kinesis and slide his bookcase aside to reveal the room with the fragment.



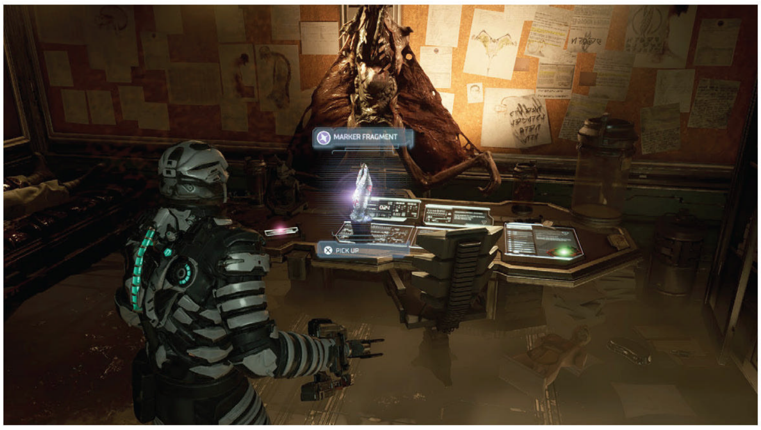
ENGINE ROOM

3 During chapter three you have to head to the Engine Room on the Engineering Deck to keep the Ishimura afloat. Head to the centre of the room, turn left, and walk towards the workbench. To the right of this you'll see the fragment hidden in the shadows.



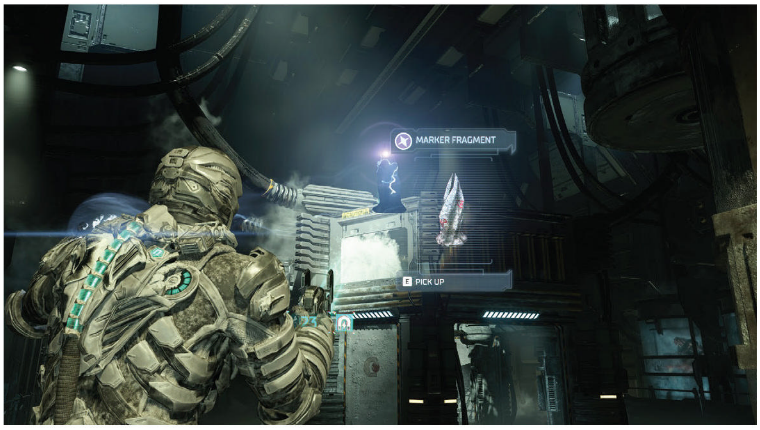
ADMIN SYSTEMS

4 In chapter four you have to reroute power to the ADS cannons from the Bridge Deck. Once you take the elevator to Admin Systems, look out for the Break Room on the right side of the corridor. Head inside to grab the fourth marker on the floor by the screen.



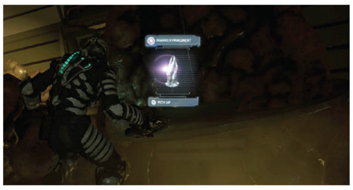
MERCER'S OFFICE

5 After Mercer sets his Hunter on you in chapter five, you have to head to his office to override the lockdown. Once inside, you'll find the fifth marker fragment on the table by a strung up Necromorph Infector specimen.



CRYOGENICS

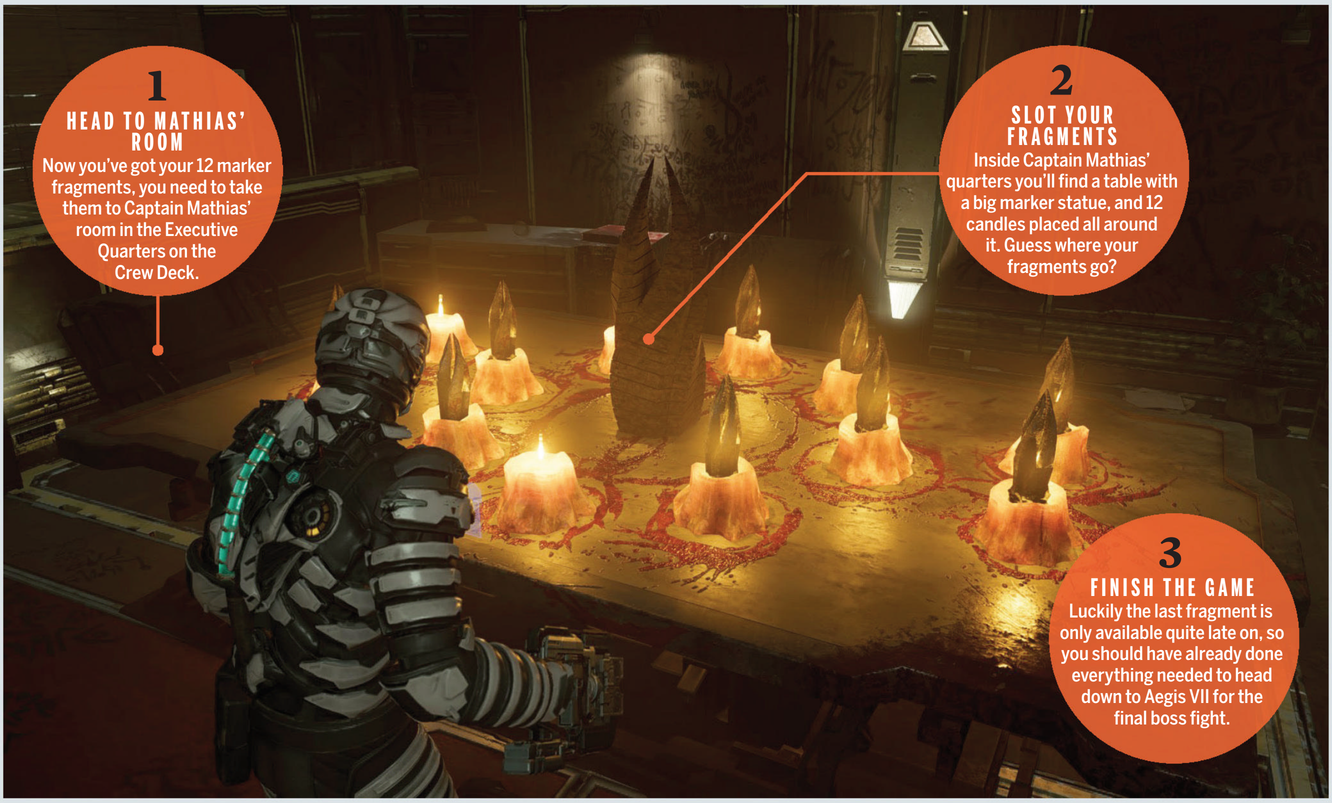
6 In the final sequence of chapter five you'll have to fight the Hunter in Cryogenics. When you enter the room, walk around to the far side of the Cryo pod and look on top of it to see the fifth fragment. You can then use kinesis to get it down.



HYDROPONICS

7 The seventh fragment is in the East Grow Chamber of the Hydroponics Deck, where you go in chapter six to inject some Wheezers. If you turn off the gravity using the Circuit Breaker at ground level, you can find the marker floating in the top right corner of the room.

ACTIVATE THE SECRET ENDING *Where to ferry those fragments*



1 HEAD TO MATHIAS' ROOM

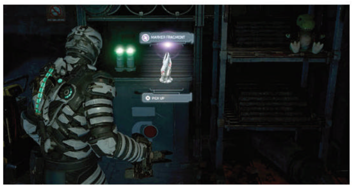
Now you've got your 12 marker fragments, you need to take them to Captain Mathias' room in the Executive Quarters on the Crew Deck.

2 SLOT YOUR FRAGMENTS

Inside Captain Mathias' quarters you'll find a table with a big marker statue, and 12 candles placed all around it. Guess where your fragments go?

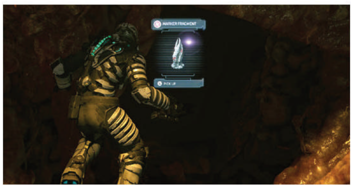
3 FINISH THE GAME

Luckily the last fragment is only available quite late on, so you should have already done everything needed to head down to Aegis VII for the final boss fight.



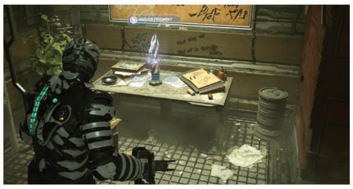
MINING

8 After you grab Dallas' Rig on the Processing Level of the Mining Deck in chapter seven, head back through the big processing chamber and out the far end. You'll find a door with Security Clearance level three, and inside it, the eighth marker fragment.



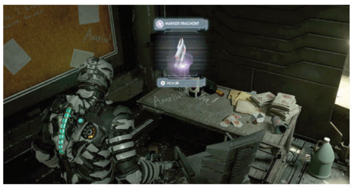
COMMS ARRAY

9 The ninth fragment is located in the Comms Array itself, and you can grab it in chapter eight when you go to repair it. Look for the big Necromorph growth to the left of the communication control screen, and boost over to find the fragment floating inside.



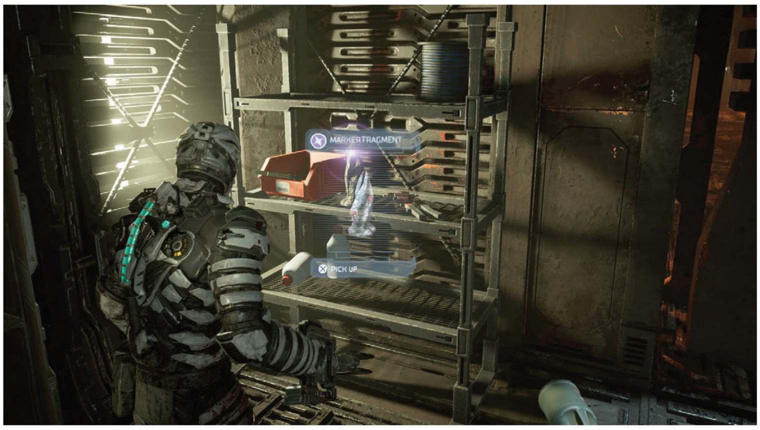
DELUXE QUARTERS

10 In chapter ten you'll find yourself on level B of the Deluxe Quarters on the Crew Deck. When you find the Circuit Breaker, swap power to the doors, and head back down the corridor into the previous room. The two far doors are now unlocked with the tenth fragment inside.



INQUIRY DESKS

11 The eleventh fragment is located in the room where you meet Dr Terence Kyne in chapter ten. He'll unlock the door for you, and when you head inside, look straight ahead to see the fragment concealed by a bottle of wine on a desk.



CARGO BAY

12 The final marker fragment is in the Cargo Bay, but you have to head here in chapter 11 to move the marker. Take the elevator down, then stick to the left side of the walkway and follow it around to the far corner. You'll spot the marker on a shelf there.

IT'S ALL OVER...

PCPP TOWERS IS TARTARUS

Can the PERSONA 3 crew traverse the ultimate Dark Hour dungeon?

1
RTX 4090
noctua

HARDWARE LABS

Can Yukari and Fuuka overcome Dave James in avatar form, a monstrous Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090 adorned with a crown of bank notes?

ECOMMERCE WING

Jacob and Katie's daemonic army of the best gaming chairs lies in wait here, testing Akihiko's penchant for a comfortable derrière to the max.

SCUMM KARAOKE BAR

If Ken and Aigis aren't careful they'll be dancing all night, trapped by Rob 'Voice of an Angel' Jones' beastly crew of living microphones.

4
HOT TAKE NUMBER 8,754,632

EDITORIAL OPERATIONS

Robin, Rich and Tyler take no prisoners in ed ops, with Mitsuru and Shinjiro having to deal with waves of brutally random living hot takes.

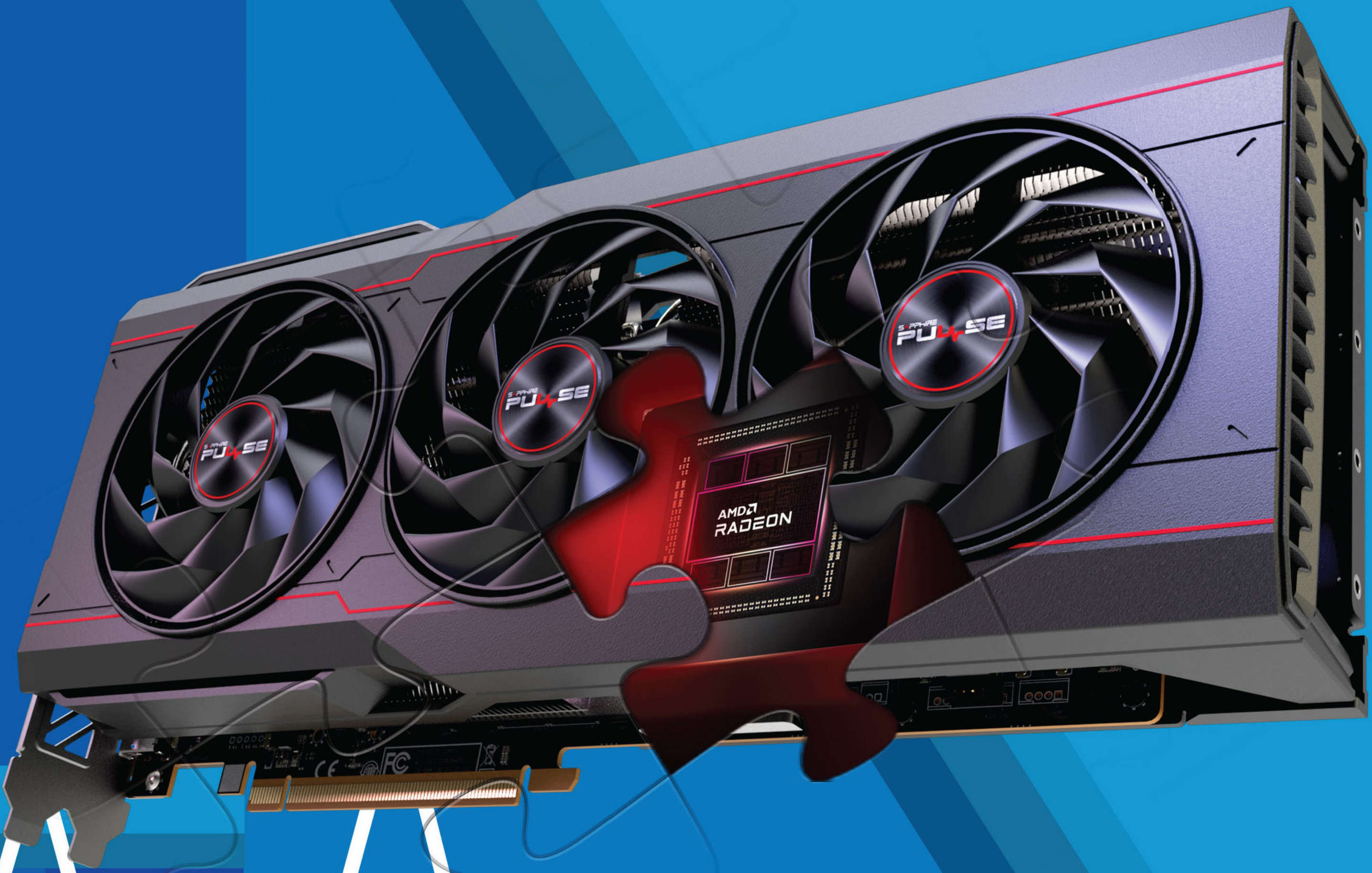
5
MR H. CRAB
One to One

EXECUTIVE SUITES

Overlords Evan and Phil are the ultimate test for Junpei as they're in so many meetings that finding them is nearly impossible.

...UNTIL JUNE 5TH

Image credit: ATLAS



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